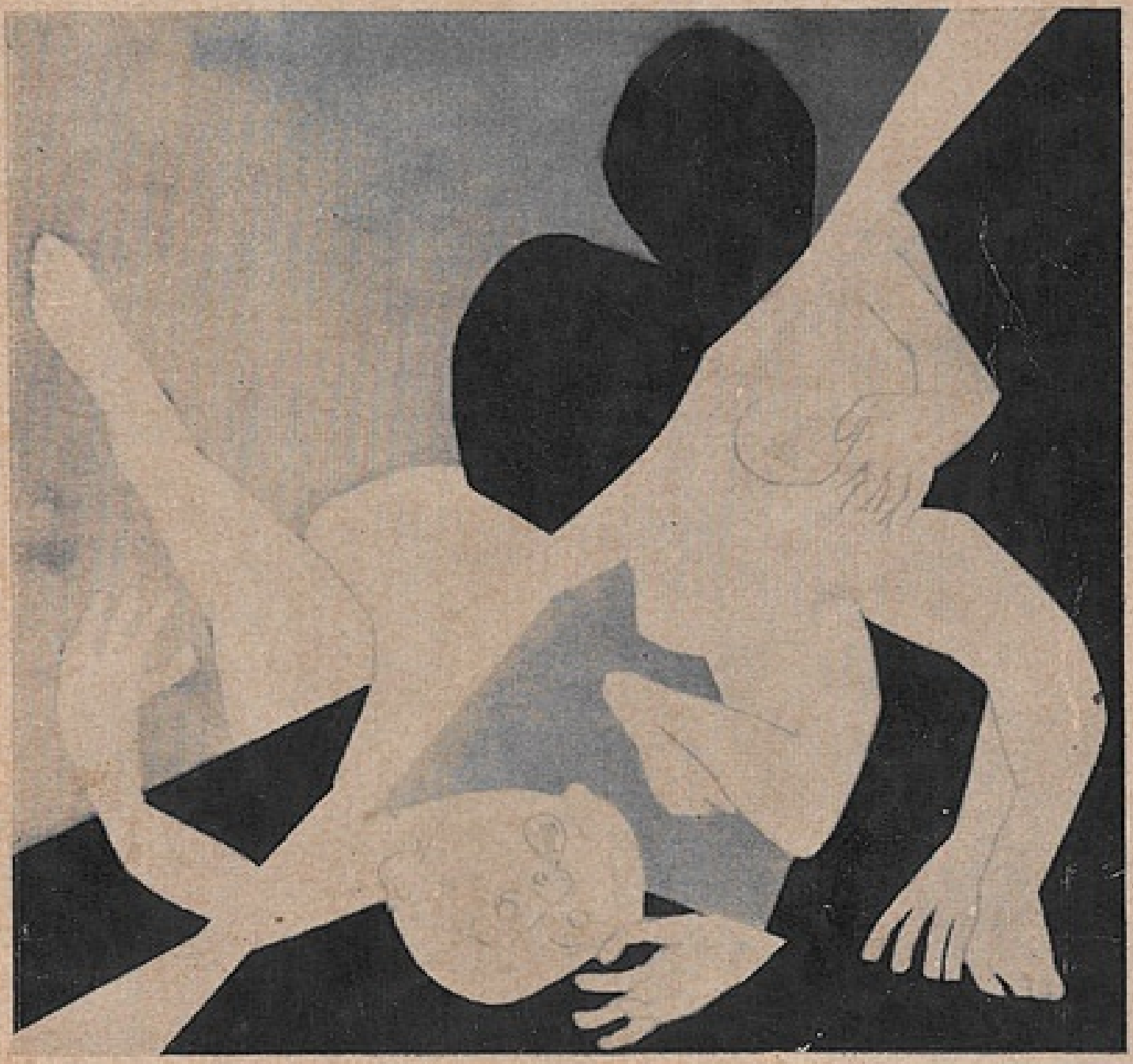
Ahmed Ali

Of Rats & Diplomats



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Of Rats & Diplomats

A Sangam Paperback
OF RATS AND DIPLOMATS

Ahmed Ali (born 1910) is known to some readers as a successful novelist in English (author of *Twilight in Delhi* and *Ocean of Night),* and to other readers as a distinguished translator of Urdu poetry *(The Golden Tradition,* the volume edited by him, contains a number of his own translations). He has also translated from Arabic, Chinese and Indonesian into English. His magnum opus, a contemporary English version of the Quran, has just been published from Karachi.

He was one of the founders of the Progressive Writers Movement in India, and is a founding fellow of the Pakistan Academy of Letters. He has taught at universities in India, Pakistan and the United States, and also served as Pakistan's ambassador to China and Morocco. In 1980, he was awarded the *Sitara-e-Imtiaz* by the Government of Pakistan.

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Even though the incidents are true in the context of today, this work is fiction. No character, or set of characters, including the rats, has any basis in history, past or present. Any resemblance to man or rodent of our day, therefore, is purely accidental. Attempts at identifying the setting would be equally unrewarding as the story is not set in any country known to geography.

Of Rats and Diplomats

A Novel

Ahmed Ali

OF RATS AND DIPLOMATS

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For

My children, Eram, Orooj, Deed and Shahana who have missed knowing the world of diplomacy.

In the world of politics there are no ethics, no morality, no divine guidance or spiritual sanction.

Amaury de Riencourt

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1

The War had ended; the armies dispersed. Hell had been let loose. Hell had been gathered back in moments of memory—shelled out cities, trunkless bodies, skinny sluts staring wide at gaping pits, the bleeding wounds. Most of the sights were memorable, but enough had not been killed. The world still seethed with humanity, a percentage maimed, decapitated in a nightmare orgy of bandages and hollowed breasts. Then it departed, and left the earth all cluttered up with broken cars, tangled tanks and crashed planes, brainless skulls and tattooed limbs. Glory to freedom of doing what you like with others' lives, bedding on bedless beds and bottomless pits, to perpetrate unfettered desire! O desire! What glory, love and sanity! The sign of the ego blazoned forth. The field of diplomacy lay yawning wide. The Third World, groaning under the heels of power-hungry, pigment- less super powers, wresting independence, was weaving nubian fantasies of faery lands and forlorn maids, their negritude, without inhibitions of aft and fore. Ads appeared for dishwashers side by side with those for diplomats. 'This be the problem of a newly created country, I guess,' rema- a rked New York Times columnist; and a limerick went round:

There was a prodigal son of his father
Who was employed in the Foreign Service cadre.
His assignment was to wash
Dishes with gin and squash,
But he washed dirty linen with diplomatic lather.

The world's capitals were filled with well-dressed men with no brains, charwomen with maids' knees in frills, drought-stricken farmers with no manners, bankrupt industrialists with no taste, and thrown-out Generals with bad tempers; new Cadillacs and moonshine, Western aristocrats seeking refuge from possessive mistresses, Middle-Eastern degenerates from ugly daughters of potentates, and Asian good-for-nothings from prosecution for profligacy or in search of it.

That is how I found myself dish-washing among diplomats. I was safe anyway, from the clutches of my first wife suing me for alimony, the woodpecker nagging of my second spouse, and the clamour of a wole retinue of misanthropes prestering for orders to do the impossible. I could now indulge my fancy to do as I liked in Ratisan, the country assigned to me, run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. The drawback was I did not know where in the world Ratisan was. The maps were all thirty years old, and some even went back to the last century, a legacy from the Government of Conquestan out of whose womb my brand new Bachusan was born. I could see the fallopian tubes closing shut over some other part of this globe to yield another pigmy virgin of land. I wish I had old Solomon's crystal and gaze into it to sight a limp of Ratisan emerging from the soil, like Venus from the sea, on a mere command of Circe's wand.

So, I called for the file dealing with Ratisan. It only contained papers dealing with the recognition of its Government on attaining independence, and the *agrement*, that is, consent of the Government of Ratisan to my appiontment as Minister Plenipotentiary and Ambassador Extraordinary. It also contained a note about myself which said among other things: 'son of a one time gun-runner who, in the last century, was connected with the opium trade and was involved at least in one of the Opium Wars. Went up to the Academy of Lunatic Sciences and received the Diploma of Lunacy. Joined the Army during World War II, and rose to be a Colonel. Fought the unsuccessful Battle of Frogs, and was made Honorary Major-General in charge of mules. Has been honoured twice, with the title of Minor Domo and Ribbon of Knight Errant Third Class. Services now terminated and placed at the disposal of the Ministry of Foreign Relations for

employment abroad. Has been married twice, but has no issue.'

I know something of the birth of this century having opened my eyes into the world in its first decade, of the Czars riding roughshod on the backs of kulaks like Kublai Khan, the Mongols and Chinese lands, the Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi building a marble boat to spite the Foreign Devils and fool her own people; the British celebrating the death of an Edwardian king by holding a grand Durbar on the ashes of Mughal pride in ravished Delhi. My aunt Zerimager regaled me with stories of the mysteries of the Court of London which I did not understand, and with tales from the Arabian Nights which filled me with wonder and dreams.

The years rolled out of narrow bylanes into roads and highways which led within a furlong into the open fields where Aunt Zerimager's husband drove the peasants with leisurely persistence to furrow the fallow land or break the virgin soil. The cattle roamed the courtyard enclosed with dry thorn and dead bushes, and the chicken cackled or scratched the dung in search of food. The town had only a few shops, the oil man's and the butcher's, the sweetmeat seller's and the grain merchant's, the vegetable vendor's and that of the dealer in bric-a-brac. The cloth merchant's shop had bright prints for coats and eiderdowns, soft silks for weddings and ceremonials, and flimsy white material for dead men's shrouds. Aunt Zerimager spoke at length of deaths, births and marriages, and the days when the foreigners destroyed everything and cut off the heads of patriots and the ample private parts of the stone deity on the outskirts of the town. Her own girth was ample, and her expansive breasts could have fed half the human race. When young she must have been the source and fountain-head of a-sexual bliss.

My father lived in far off China, smoking opium pipes. My grandfather came from the mountain of honey-suck- ing nomads and his father before him from the steppes of roaming wild ass and ponies. My mother's father had come from the banks of the Tigris, my grandmother from the plains of Indian Ganges and her mother's mother from the valley of Rhone. As a natural corollary I was conceived by the English Humber where my father had gone purchasing guns and where my sweet Cynthia now complains of my false promises and opium-obfuscated dreams.

I saw the century roll full-length into the War and the incendiary hell of nineteen thirty nine, before I was eight and twenty, roll from the bells of ox-carts and horse-driven buggies to the nightmare of railways and roaring engines, leisure to race with time, music-filled nights to radios and movies, and lose itself

in the bedlam of the Bronx and the East End, the crazy cranes of Chryslerville dumping bodies in Soviet jails, from war ravaged fronts to Ratisan whose geographical identity was equally unknown to the Travel agents and the pen-pushing clerks of the Foreign Office oblivious of dreams and damozels by Bali's shores or ogling dames with moles on cheeks sailing along the silent Seine.

We had a First Secretary in charge of the Mission there, but he had gone direct to Ratisan from the Monarchy of Nirvan to open the embassy after the rupture of diplomatic relations for no other reason than the refusal of that country's monarch to marry his sister to our President's impotent son. The other staff had gone with him from there, so that none knew the position of Ratisan on the compass from Bachusan's geographical point. It is a pity I was not ambassador to that country. I would have hijacked the prince to win the princess's hand. But then it transpired the monarch was a commoner and wished to ally himself with a prince with blue blood which our President was not.

The ignorance of the Foreign Office, wrapped up in red tape, was unspeakable. I must take charge of it one day and set their left-lobed brains right or steam-roller the lot. The Travel Agents, however, discovered at long last that to reach Ratisan one had to cross three subcontinents including parts of Asia and Europe. They sent a folder with coloured pictures of hills, halls and seraph-winged maids with bulg-ing breasts. The sensation of Aunt Zerimager pressing me to her bosom went tingling past the cast-off alleys of Time.

Rumours of intrigue were in the air. Our Foreign Office being famous for fickleness and changing its mind, I applied for an interview with the Right Hon'ble, the President, who asked me to fly the country's flag high and present the best image of Bachusan and avoid being mulish. 'Above all,' he said, 'do not make a fool of yourself. We had the monopoly of wiseacres and have a surfeit of greenhorns,' he concluded, and waived me away with his hand.

'The most important part of an ambassador's job is to keep the Chancery humming,' I heard a diplomat say at a reception in my honour by the Ambassador of England whose brother had fought with me during the War, reminding me of beehives in Aunt Zerimager's rose garden and stinging bees humming over tube-roses and jasmine. None-theless I thanked him for the tip; and armed with this advice and a large envelope from the President's Secretariat sealed with red wax and silken ribbons, I left for Ratisan.

2

I was born in Pischewanbur, a city as old as time, surrounded by hills through which caravan routes went in all directions, and the air smelt of horse dung and camel piss and sweat of cameleers and grooms. My servant, a giant of a man, took me sometimes to the busy inn to listen to stories of monsters and harpies and love-lorn maidens languishing in captivity, but really to smoke opium with the caravan men.

In the Street of the Fishing Cat which ran along the river Sander, I once caught a mermaid with no legs but ample breasts. I was so excited I took it straight to Aunt Zerima- ger to keep in a tank. But the ferocious cat who lived in a cavern up the hill, came bouncing with flame-shooting eyes and devoured my cherished catch. I was so frightened that I fell ill, and my mother had to call a voodoo man to exorcise the devil. When I was at the Academy it dawned on me that it was a nightmare. The mermaid was really the Orient, the ferocious cat the West which had acquired power over the fabulous beast by virtue of Knowledge as in voodoo, and superiority over the victim. I was the victim.

My father travelled a great deal in Europe and the Far East. He was earning a lot as my mother's great wooden chest decorated with copper discs and silver bands was full of guineas and gold and many another glittering thing. I used to hear stories of wonderful cities of castles and palaces with gilded cupolas and domes made of marble and jade, a feast for the eyes and treasures untold.

But Micea, the capital of Ratisan, was a city like many others in the newly freed Fourth World, with a mixture of modern and primitive architecture, and an incongruous look like the POWs in a barbed wire fence. The outskirts were studded with clusters of hovels made of tin and cardboard packings with many of them still showing two hands joined in meeting across gold laces and bulldog boots; and some had the word "Aid' still showing through dirt and dust. Small dark openings marked the doors, and smoke emitted from some, curling up towards the sky in search of freedom and fresh air. Half-naked urchins ran in and out of them, some laughing, some crying, and men in rags and dirty clothes lounged under trees or sat on sidewalks doing nothing. Women, hiding their breasts under fan-like curtains of cloth, but naked otherwise, sat washing vegetables in pools of dirty water, or stood gossiping, arms akimbo.

The First Secretary, who was acting as Charge d' Affaires, and was called by

everyone CDA, received me in a manner as though he were the Foreign Minister of Ratisan, and introduced me to the Protocol Officer and other Ratisanians as 'the Ambassador', which I did not like in the least. Did they not call everyone His Excellency in the Foreign Service even though the President was addressed as plain Mr President?

As we came to the precincts of the city, the roads widened and looked clean. On either side cottages and neat bungalows with gardens became more and more frequent. Passing a camel back culvert over a stinking open sewage canal, we came into a quarter with poplars and tall mansions enclosed by high walls over which bougainvillaea flowered in many shades, and on some the ivy climbed, rather like the stately homes of England.

'This is the Diplomatic Quarter,' CDA informed me, 'where the embassy will be located when the Governmentt)f Ratisan has given us a house.'

'Where am I staying till then?'

'In the hotel for diplomats, the Hotel des Gallants de Loisir. A suite has been reserved for you. It's the best, having been occupied once by Sa Majeste le Cha du Moulot.'

I felt nonplussed, but impressed by this high sounding name, and looked at the officer, not knowing whether to thank him for the accomodation or be angry for not arranging an old palace in keeping with my rank and position. He smiled in a condescending way, showing rodent-like pointed teeth.

'We are short of accomodation,' he said. 'It was with difficulty that we could secure the suite for Your Excellency.'

'But what about all these bungalows?'

'They are occupied. We have a long list of diplomats waiting for accomodation, many Samians among them...'

I was discouraged and, to boot, learnt that I had nothing to do until I presented my credentials to the President. CDA was to continue as Head of Mission till then. My presence was superfluous. I was sent out in command, but I had no epaulettes, it seemed. This reminded me of the day when I had to surrender behind the lines without a fight with three hundred NCOs and Other Ranks, and my cap and belt were taken away by the captors along with my Colonel's badge. Aunt Zerimager would have called me a eunuch in charge of a

harem, had she heard of this in her grave...

So, I took over the Chancery. Having seen the behaviour of CDA, and his lack of interest in my comforts, I decided to kill the cat the very first day, and summoned the staff and told them I was in command henceforth, that CDA was only the First Secretary. Everyone had to obey my orders, and anyone who did not, would be sent back post haste. All the members of the staff looked at CDA. So, I took out the Scriptures from my pocket and said: 'You must take an oath of loyalty to me.'

As I thought they could always go back on their word, I dictated an Office Order, especially because I feared that CDA may prove difficult, and asked them to give me an undertaking to that effect. Then I dismissed the lot of them, and wondered how long I was going to wait for presenting the credentials. A call had to be made on the Chief of Protocol, and preliminaries discussed. Afterwards the Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs was to receive me, a woman, I was informed. I felt excited at the prospect. An appointment was made with the Chief of Protocol for the next morning.

He was a man with sparse moustaches like those of a rat, small round eyes, and a tired look of dissipation, and talked about the Battle of Frogs. He seemed to know a good deal about me and asked about the Opium Wars. It transpired he was also an Army man and had served in a brigade on the other side in the area where I had to surrender. I recalled his brigade had won the Battle of Sharks, fought in knee deep water with cutlass in hand.

CDA asked him about the date of presenting the credentials. His style was cramped and he mumbled:

'Oh, the credentials. I shall consult the engagement schedule of His Excellency the President. He is very busy, you know'; then turning towards me: 'You are surely not in a hurry, Excellency?'

As a matter of fact I was. CDA was to remain Head of Mission until then, and might whisper things in the ears of diplomats.

'I have a message from our President,' I said, 'Which I should like to deliver as soon as possible.'

'Of course. I shall see what I can do.'

This terminated the interview without any mention of the Vice Foreign

Minister.

'When am I going to see her?' I asked CDA. 'You should have arranged it with that man of Protocol.'

'Such things take time in Ratisan. The Ambassador of Philippines had to wait two months to present his credentials; and the Vice Minister made him wait nearly a month.'

'Can't the Ambassador of England do something about it?'

'I don't think so.'

'I would like to see him in any case. Telephone and tell him that. What did you say his name was?'

'Sir Broadguage Bloomingfield.'

As it was a summer afternoon, and the meeting purely informal, he received me in his backyard garden with pointed artificial rocks which had caves and paths and fuzzy- wuzzy pine trees. On a stone seat was placed a large glass jar filled with water and aquatic plants; and an Irish setter sat by his chair and growled at my approach.

'Welcome to Ratisan,' he said coming forward to shake hands with me. 'I take it this is your first diplomatic assignment.'

'As a matter of fact it is. But I have seen action in many countries.'

'Indeed,' he said sympathetically, and began to look in the direction of the glass jar with a twinkle, I felt, in his eyes, which made me ask him:

'What do you keep in that?

'Tadpoles,' he replied, looking amused. 'I dare say you recognise them.'

In reality I did not. They looked rather like small fish with tails and flat round bodies, and wriggled hectically in spurts and sank down to the bottom.

'What I like about them is their clustering together like diplomats in a crowd,' he said looking up at them from his bent position, his hands resting on his knees, a sharp glint in his eyes. 'When they have shed their tails, they become independent and begin to look around for themselves. Have you ever tried to annoy a grown-up frog?' he asked with the mischievous delight of a child. 'How self-important it becomes and bulges its belly into a round ball, and seems to

meet your challenge...'

I was suddenly reminded of an incident during the Battle of Frogs when we were taken unawares and challenged by the enemy emerging a few yards away from behind a cluster of trees. With our guns held above our shoulders, we had charged forward, and the attacking soldiers had held their sides and laughed. We must have presented a funny sight, exactly like the British Ambassador's frog.

'But come, Mr Ambassador-designate, let us have a cup of tea,' said Sir Broadguage Bloomingfield, folding up his lines, and I was awakened from my reverie. Tadpoles in a glass jar and the Battle of Frogs! Indeed, was he a mad man or a wizard? I began to wonder, but was soon lost in buttered scones and crumpets which had appeared all from nowhere, so silently had his servants laid the table in the garden while we had looked at the wriggling shapes in the jar. We were interrupted for a minute by one of his men who came in, and showing him a slip of paper, walked out. It was obvi ously something trivial for he did not even wince.

I felt rather bewildered, lost in a vast, humming world I did not understand. Feeling weary, I sat back in the chair. The strain of the journey which I had not felt so far came all too suddenly upon me, making me tired in every joint. With eyes half-closed, I asked him almost with humility: 'What sort of people, Sir Broadguage, are the Ratisanians? And how long shall I have to wait for this business of accreditation?'

'As for accreditation, Mr Ambassador, you are already here in Micea. You may have to wait for presenting your credentials. For the Ratisanians are rather temperamental people. They may even give the impression of superiority. You see, they have lived under foreign rule for centuries, and have no experience of running a country. As for foreign relations, I doubt if they know the rules of protocol. Diplomacy is an unknown science to them, or art if you like. They want to ride roughshod; but they are quite shrewd otherwise, and can be very nice, even naive, if you know how to handle them. You will see for yourself.

'Which means I shall have to wait rather long for presenting my credentials.'

'Not necessarily; but quite a few envoys have had to wait for weeks before they could meet even the Vice Foreign Minister.'

'A woman, I understand.'

'It was, but no longer. You could not have heard, of course.

She eloped this afternoon.'

'I was looking forward to meeting her,' I said. 'What a pity! With whom did she elope?'

'We shall know in due course. But, for your personal information, he was a member of a diplomatic Mission.'

'She must have been very pretty.'

'It all depends on how you look at it. But if you mean that diplomats go for the prettiest things, I may tell you that the Princess of Greece had a nose as crooked as a crow and was as thin as a web, and yet the Secretary of Spain fell for her as the wife of the Ensorcelled Prince had done for the hideous Negro slave in the story.'

I was impressed by his manner, and could not help saying: 'You know a great deal, Sir Broadguage.'

'This is nothing. Your First Secretary will tell you more.'

This was like a stab. The worm seemed to have got on well with people. I must reverse the impression he had created, I said to myself, as ants began to crawl over my body I could not enjoy the Englishman's company and took his leave, the more so as I feared the Vice Minister may have eloped with CDA himself.

It was not with him, however, that she had eloped. He knew about it, and also, but how, I wondered, that it was Touche le Beau, Attache at the Embassy of Samia, a country which, along with Kharosa, had the greatest interest in Ratisan on account of its strategic position. Since Ratisan had been a colony until recently, Samia managed to establish her sphere of influence in the country since the former rulers had gone bankrupt as a result of War, and had bundled up their paraphernelia in a hurry and departed. Kharosa, in her turn, tried to fill the vacuum created by independence, but Samia, being first in the field, and having inherited withdrawing Imperia's empty colonial empire, succeeded in entrenching herself by giving Ratian aid and more aid, desired and unwanted, working largely through a system of unsolicited bribes for which a secret service organization known as the SSO had spread its tentacles like the suckered arms of the octopus. Kharosa pulled strings and tried to win over the Vice Foreign Minister, but the SSO sabotaged the move. As a consequence a cold war existed between the two powers for supremacy in Ratisan as well as in international affairs generally.

The Vice Foreign Minister came to hold a key position in this game of power politics. She had come to have admiration for Kharosa's leaders during the struggle for independence being attention-hungry and overtly flattered by them as a potential ally and saboteur, and could influence the foreign policy of Ratisan in their favour through the President who was known to have been an admirer of hers. She did have a peculiar charm, a glow of evanescence, I was told, something we associate with the search for love or long-lost youth— which made me nostalgic for Aunt Zerimager when she was young. For the ageing and the young both found in her the image of their dreams, I gathered, although by ordinary standards she was not pretty being already thirty-five. If she were removed from the scene, the Samians felt, CDA told me, the pro-Kharosan attitude of Ratisan would be checked. Knowing her weakness for a certain type of men the Samians brought as Attache, the not-so-handsome Touche le Beau, who had a background of innocence and profligacy, and had enjoyed the reputation of hobnobbing with political women. He was known to have been an admirer of Madame Chiang and used to take her out to nightclubs at a time when half the world was crazy about her dress slit up to her thighs. CDA told me an extraordinary story of war lords and bandits and Madame Chiang's heartwinning role in the politics of her country. I could not follow a good deal of it not being familiar with China and her political history, but in which I was interested as my father had been connected with that part of the world. I was too small when he died, but my mother used to tell me fantastic tales of robbers she had heard from my father, how they wore pigtails like women and kept moustaches a yard long. She possessed some poison plates and ornaments given her by my father. I have saved a jade lion from his collection which had been given me as a toy. I must say it looks like a dog, but the colour is wonderful, and I keep it in a glass case sitting on the beautifully carved rose-wood stand that came with it.

The reason for the elopement of the Vice Minister, but according to CDA, of Touche le Beau with her, was her inexplicable fascination for China where she had spent her childhood, and secret jealousy of Madame Chiang, which became the psychological link between her and Touche le Beau. That was the reason why, I suppose, my father never came back from that land. I heaved a sigh of relief, and dreamt of the Chinese beauty's cream white thighs, which began to haunt me day and night.

'You should include this in the Ambassador's report,' I told him. It's a new angle on Ratisan.'

'I have already done so,' he said.

'But the elopement took place only today. How could you write about it in advance?'

'The writing on the wall needs no scrutiny. One learns a good deal from the common man.'

'Nonsense,' I replied. 'Common people are ignoramuses and fools.'

'Confucius, the Chinese sage,' he said contemplatively, 'said that common men and women, however much below the ordinary standard of character, can carry the way of knowledge into practice. And Lao Tze said: "The further one pursues knowledge, the less one knows".'

'I see no connection. Anyway, you should give me a list of all persons who will be useful to me...'

His tone much annoyed me. The more I thought of this conversation the more vexed I became with him. God knows why the Government sends all these educated gentry to their Missions. They are so difficult to manage. I asked him how he came to know about the Vice Minister's elopement, and he gave me a lecture on diplomacy. Preposterous, his telling me what Low Zoo and Confusion said about knowledge, as if I have not seen enough zoos in my life! Is this Embassy itself not a zoo? Is there not enough confusion here? Diplomacy, with which he tried to impress me, is baloney. It is nothing more than asserting yourself and frightening others with the show of your strength and emphasising their own weakness to them. If you yield, as in war, you lose. If you corner them and attack, you succeed. When in difficulty, bully or bribe. There is no other way.

Why did the Government spend fifty thousand dollars a year on maintaining this Mission? But we are towing the line of Big Powers which have the machinery for governing vast empires, or those which are trying to add to their possessions and have taken upon themselves the unwanted responsibility of shaping their lives for the weaker countries. I could understand the need for keeping large and well- equipped armies. They are essential for controlling the mess created by the ever-increasing population of the world. One reason why it's increasing is lack of frequent wars. Samia at least knows the right use of its soldiers and missiles. The countries it was trying to control, once subdued, would become streamlined and habitable when the undesirable millions have been wiped out. They are doing no good to humanity, anyway.

But, alas, I was in charge not of an army, but a collection of fools who lived on ink and paper and misguiding the Government with concocted reports of events and their own exploits. I decided they will not do so while I was Ambassador, and sent CDA to Protocol about my credentials. The delay, I was informed, was due to the non-existence of a Vice Foreign Minister, and things had to wait until one was found. I had no alternative but to twiddle my thumbs.

The suspense, however, was embarassing. So, I sent CDA again after a few days, and instructed him to tell the Chief of Protocol that if the presentation of credentials was delayed any further I will have no choice but to go back to Bachusan. That did have the desired effect. I was informed that His Excellency the President would receive me in three days. As no Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs had been appointed, and as the Foreign Minister, who was also the Chef du Cabinet, had gone to New York to attend the session of the UN General Assembly where the dispute between Israel and the Arabs was coming up for discussion, the formality of calling on the Minister for Foreign Affairs was dispensed with, and I'was to meet the President without them. Their presence was superfluous anyway, as I was to present my credentials direct to the Head of State as Head of Mission, and no intermediaries were required at our tete-a-tete.

3

The time given for the presentation of credentials was ten o'clock, and my watch already showed ten after ten. I got tired of waiting. Conversation was difficult as the Chief of Protocol talked only in whispers out of presidential awe, sensing perhaps the President's presence through some inherent sensory sight. So, I went over the room, lingering before the flower vases which, CDA explained, were fine and some rare. I sat down again, but my tails started developing creases.

At last, there was a stir. The Chief of Protocol jumped from his chair. His Excellency the President entered from the left, his balding head showing a tiara of mousy hair. Once heavily built, he was now flabby, with the flesh on his sallow checks hanging slightly as though pulled by doting mistresses. His shoulders made an angle of five degrees from the back downwards, with the result that the red tie with a white rat, dangled from the collar of his nylon shirt and threw the golden shade of his suit into prominence. The shoes he wore were immaculate, in two tones, brown and white. He looked patriarchal, but there was something of an old woman about his face.

The Chief of Protocol stepped back at his approach, then presented me to the President.

'His Excellency, Col Sourirada Soutanna-..' he said.

'General,' I corrected him. The President looked from my face to his.

'His Excellency,' the Chief repeated unblushingly, 'Honorary Major-General Sourirada Soutanna, designate Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the People's Presidency of Bachusan.'

I did not like the insult implicit in the use of'honorary', but I bowed. The President proferred his hand.

'How do you like our country?' he asked amicably. 'Unfortunately, we do not have an army worthy of your consideration, General Ambassador, being a poor and peace,- loving nation.'

After the Chief of Protocol's insult, the satirical tone of the last remark put me out completely, and I felt tongue-tied. While I thought of the most diplomatic thing to say, I began to gaze at his shoes which held me, I know not why, spellbound, with their toes and top of brown kid skin and the sides of white buckram.

'These shoes, Excellency, cost me fifty dollars,' the President remarked unexpectedly, pulling up the leg of his trousers to show the shoes better. I was taken aback, not fully . comprehending what he meant.

'What, Excellency?' I asked, nonplussed. 'What did you say? Fifteen...'

'No. Fifty. These shoes, I said cost...'

My eyes must have burst out of my sockets, for he started laughing in good-humoured guffaws.

'I don't understand, Your Excellency,' I said, unable to fathom the mystery.

'My President sends his warm greetings to Your Excellency, and all good wishes for the happiness, health and prosperity of yourself and the people of Ratisan...'

'I reciprocate the feelings. Tell him that. But you know, Mr Ambassador, the envoy ofPerkistan presented his letter of credence in his sleeping suit, and asked me, to boot, how much my shoes cost. You see, I was new at receiving credentials then. So I thought that was the formula. But come, let's forget it, although I can

tell you in confidence that some of his fellow diplomats were taken for gipsies by their dress in America and put in jail.'

He began to laugh again, and slapped me familiarly on the back so hard that I fell forward and caught a standard lamp for support and received a mild electric shock from a leaking wire. This was quite different from dish-washing. I was learning my first lesson in diplomacy.

Recovering from my discomfiture, I presented the letter I had brought, and which was to open the magic door. Then I took up my interrupted speech: 'Our two countries, Excellency have their primitive, I mean pristine, glory in common, and the desire for a new culture that would chase out the glittering models we have been aping until recently.' At that moment a mouse crawled over my foot and made me jerk my leg, diverting the trend of my thought. 'As you are aware, Excellency, my country is rich in cats that have eaten up the quails which were abundant in the underbrush...'

It so happened, though I did not know at the time, that Ratisan was infested with rats which destroyed all the grain produced by the fertile plains. They were at a loss to find a remedy for them. They had applied to the United Nations for help, and were receiving pesticides in aid from Samia for the destruction of the pests. Hearing of the abundance of cats in my country, therefore, His Excellency the Presi-dent stood up from his seat, and interrupted:

'That's wonderful, Mr Ambassador, most wonderful. Our respective countries have much in common. You have cats; we have rats. We can develop a positive trade. I shall ask my Chef du Cabinet to speak to the Minister in charge of Commerce to discuss the possibilities of trade between us-.. Yes, go on, Excellency, what else do you have that we can take?'

I was suddenly elated at the thought of my initial diplomatic success even before I had finished with presenting my letter of deliverance from the run of unprivileged humanity. In my enthusiasm I lost the thread of my speech, and stared the Chief of Protocol full in the face. He bowed, and delicacies were immediately brought in and I started devouring them ravenously, as they were excellent and different from any I had ever tasted. Moreover, they were served by tantalising maids wearing skirts of gauze with rats, begging on their haunches, embroidered on either breast.

The President looked fidgety, and there was no help but to take his leave, at which the Chief of Protocol seemed much relieved. Back through the streets we

drove. The policemen on duty raised their hands to the foreheads in salute. Men with nothing to do, and women hiding their breasts behind fan-like curtains of cloth, walked leisurely on roads, or stood in fron of shop windows full of cosmetics and Samian goods. Milk-shake and ice-cream vendors seemed to do a roaring trade, and children carried coloured balloons on strings. They had gold laces and boots painted on them. I felt flushed with victory. Already the words of a telegram announcing my triumph were whirling through my brain. CDA must have been impressed by my powers of negotiation. If he was not, it was his duty to have been!

Then the rats began to worry me. Why did they not tell me about them in the Chancery? It was CDA's business to have briefed me on such matters of importance. He was disloyal both to me and the Government in keeping this information from me. But for my abilities, we would have missed this opportunity of helping Ratisan and selling our cats. But even the British Ambassador had not mentioned them, which rather puzzled me. I suppose, it was natural for him to suppress the information lest I stole a march over him...

The basic facts about rats, CDA told me, were that they were a taboo that became a totem. They assumed such importance because they are prolific and, in the forgotten past, must have become a symbol of fertility. In two years, for instance, a pair of rats could multiply to over two hundred thousand, he said. Having become sacred, they were not allowed to be killed with the result that they became a menace and destroyed whole crops. The colonial rulers tried to control the pests. In the beginning this led to Rat Riots, and many Ratisanians were killed by the police who were ordered to suppress the disturbances. Eventually the Government launched an educative campaign which, however, had little effect on the people who were steeped in ignorance. So, they secretly introduced bubonic fleas, and thousands of Ratisanians died of plague like rats. This practical lesson succeeded where educational propaganda had failed, and millions of rats were destroyed. But the ignorant masses still held them in respect; and when Ratisan became independent, the rats came back into their own again.

The first few prime ministers, CDA continued, did not wish to alter the state of things for fear of losing their popularity. But when the Presidency was established by a bloodless *coup d'etat* and palace intrigue, the President became worried about economic waste and loss of precious food grain, the import of which was a constant drain on the country's foreign exchange resources. The

Samians then offered to supply wheat in economic aid, sending experts to advise the Government of Ratisan on the best means of improving their agricultural methods, and bulls to fecundate their cows. Discovering the extent of damage done to crops by the rats they first informed their own Government, then submitted their findings, bound in Morocco leather, to the President, which suggested extermination of the rats. The President announced in a broadcast speech over the national hook-up that the menace must and will be dealt with suitably. The upshot of this was the import of more Samian experts who, in consultation with their authorities, recommended the extensive use of pesticide which, being in excess of their needs, was given by Samia in economic aid.

Kharosa was left behind in the race, and offered to destroy the rats by more highly developed methods, but Samian experts advised against the Kharosan plan as it could destroy other useful life. They worked subtly through the Vice Foreign Minister who had already come under the spell of Touche le Beau. It was a pity the Ratisanians did not accept Kharosan aid, CDA said, for according to his secret information, the Kharosans had been working on a method of thought control which could change the semblance of any living thing, through which they had succeeded in bringing their own population into complete submission to the will of the leaders, and could have eliminated the rats completely from Ratisan by changing them to shrews. The Kharosan Ambassador was a scientist himself, he said, and was thought to be engaged on experiments with the instincts of living organisms.

This sounded so nonsensical that I felt impatient, and asked: 'But what happened to the rats?'

'The rats,' he said, 'developed immunity to pesticide, and enlightened Ratisanians clamoured for drastic action. The Government, in consequence, approached the UN for help. But if you ask my opinion, the Samians are more interested in selling their chemical powder, and the United Nations will not be able to do anything, for he who pays the piper calls the tune. But to tell you frankly I was surprised when the President jumped at the mention of cats.'

'And cats shall we sell to Ratisan,' I said. 'We have the world's monopoly of them and shall be happy to pass them on to Ratisan...'

The British Ambassador telephoned to convey his felicitations. There was another telephone call.

'Who?' I said into the mouth piece as someone congratulated me from the

other end of the line.

'Major Toon-toon, the Bambian Counselled You wouldn't recognise me, perhaps, Excellency. But we fought shoulder to shoulder in the last War.' That did ring a bell; but the man's face did not come before my eyes.

'Yes, yes, go on, Excellency,' I prodded. 'That does ring a bell, but—'

'The year was forty-four, and the regiment, the Regiment of Routs.'

'Good Lord! I remember. What are you doing here of all places?'

'I am in the Foreign Service of Bambia. I will tell you all about it when we meet. I am giving a small party, and shall be honoured if you will grace the occasion.'

'That would be nice.'

'Do come, Excellency. It's exclusive; something you would like. I shall send you a card, and call on you myself...'

So, that was Toon-toon. How strange to find him in Micea. I recalled him vividly, medium height, snub-nosed, hide-coloured, but jolly company, so full of life and fun, fond of any odd skirt he met; and the wonder was he did not have to use force. They fell for him as fish for earthworms. Even in the midst of shelling he would hook them out of nowhere. And did we have fun—what fun!—in the enemy villages and our own. 'Look at this slut, Colonel,'he would say. 'I caught her sneaking into the trenches in search of company. What do you say?' Or, 'I found her spying for the enemy. I thought you would like to talk to her first yourself, and have brought her straight away. We have been short of rations of late!' Then he would ask for my bottle, take a long swig and wait outside the tent in patience, dreaming of the next victim or maybe his mother or his sweetheart, though I am sure he had no girl waiting for him. Good old Toon-toon. He never was exclusive. How strange to hear him talk of invitation cards. I could never associate him with diplomacy, the stinking Lieut!

But then our country got divided into as many parts as there were parties, by the machinations of God-damned politicians exploiting the warring instincts. Or did God create this cursed earth bit by bit which was put together by Beelzebub, to be cut up again by Adam's fighting brood who had nothing else to do but copulate and multiply and fight and fight beginning right with Cain and Abel? The world was even then as large, but they could not see beyond their noses. It

was just as well, for there was no other way of getting rid of over-population. Yet the problem remains, in spite of floods and famine, pestilence and war.

I once had three roosters in a flock of some forty hens. One was red, one white, the third black. They seemed quite happy to begin with. But one morning I found the Rhode and the Leghorn arrayed for battle, necks stretched, feathers fanned out, forming a halo round their crowns, eyes holding eyes in hypnotic trance, balanced and poised. Then sud-denly wings flapped, legs crashed into legs, chest against chest, with a whirling thud. They fell back momentarily, but were at it again, still fresh for the next round and the next. Blood trickled from their crowns, and the Leghorn's feathers were smudged with red. I must say it was a wonderful sight, but I walked in and kicked them apart. I saw this happen more than once. Then one day as I went into the chicken- yard, I found the Leghorn crouching in a corner, head under chest, and drove the coward away from its hiding place. The Rhode flapped its wings and ran after it, neck ruffled into a ruff. But the will had been smashed out of the Leghorn. It fled, tail furled, for the corner where the Rhode began to lash him with his battle-proud legs. Eventually the Leghorn died, and the Rhode, drunk on blood, sharpened his spurs on the Minorca who also could not survive the onslaught. I got rid of the Rhode, and put two cockerels of the same brood in the chicken-yard. They too started the usual game until only one was left to lord over the widowed hens. But the cursed thing was that ten eggs out of twelve remained infertile. The God-damned race of cockerels that rules the earth!

I guess men have evolved from roosters and not monkeys as Darwin said. They inherit vast areas, then begin to multiply faster than guinea pigs, and fight over every inch of land, dividing it up into a million bits, much more than they can count, and smaller than a mile. Three things, Aunt Zeri- mager used to say, lie at the root of every quarrel, gold, land and woman; and this fungus growth of politicians has added countries to the list. It's a good thing there were no politicians in Tamerlane's time, and he kept the whole world to himself. If I were him I would do the same. And now dictators have multiplied, and every communist and capitalist is a Hitler in the making. Even the smaller fry in every land from Malaysia to Ghana want a bit of this mildewed earth to be President or Premier of, for they will have no chance otherwise at all. The whole wide world has become a battlefield. But then, without it we, the Generals, would never have got our share and birthright, from the land of Shadow Plays to that of the Pyramids.

Poor Toon-toon was a victim of this cancerous growth of politics, I suppose. His country and mine, once part of a larger chunk, got cut up into strips, Serpentinia getting the lion's share by virtue of the colour of the largest mass that happened to be the same, and the venom of glib Machiave- lianism they carried in their heads. Was Toon-toon a victim of partition? I think not. He would have joined a business firm after the War as a field officer at best, the lazy lump of easy flesh that he was. And now he holds a lucrative post in the Diplomatic Service of his country. Yet I too am ambassador for the same reason today. But then, I was a General, and he remained where he was even though he was given a crown as a result of victory.

I was, however, glad to find him in Micea, not that he had much brains. On the contrary, he was a dud like many shells that fell but did not explode. Yet he was lively and gay, and would be useful in many ways. I won't have to search for skirts in any case. Unless he has changed, he should be hooking them still out of nowhere. I wish he had some brains too, for he could then be of immense help. Nevertheless, he could be a good contact man, and I could learn much gossip from him.

4

His Excellency the President was as good as his word, for the Minister of Trade and Commerce invited me to a banquet within a month of my presenting the credentials. The Chef du Cabinet had also come back from the UN, and when I called on him, I enquired about the Arab-Israel dispute.

It's a difficult case,' he observed. 'The Jews have to have a home; but the Arabs cannot be expected to give up their land. The Balfour Declaration allowed the Jews a homeland not a state. Palestine has been there for 2000 years since Roman times. Even David did not consider Transjordan the 'Promised Land'. When the frightened Britons withdrew their forces from Palestine in great hurry after the War, America rushed to recognize Israel, and the Jews entered others' homes. We do not want another Vietnam. Higher principles are involved.'

'What I don't understand, your Excellency.' I said, 'is that the Jews who were victims of German tyranny not so long ago, should behave with such inhuman callousness and cruelty towards the Palestinians whom they have dispossessed and reduced to unwanted refugees in their own land, as they were themselves under Hitler. It is the Palestinians who should call for your sympathy and

support.'

'I agree, Excellency,' the Prime Minister said; 'but the situation has changed. America is supporting the Jews against the Arabs. We have no alternative, being ourselves dependent on USA for support and security.'

I must say I admired his frankness, or was it naivete? But why doesn't Russia do something?" I asked. 'How can Russia interfere having connived at the creation of Israel and sent many of her Jews there?' he explained. 'Do not forget, Excellency, that Marx was a Jew and Stalin himself was half a one... But tell me about your affairs. Has your deal about the cats come through?

I thanked him for his interest, and informed him that I was already in touch with the Minister of Trade.

'Good luck', he said at parting; and I looked forward to the Minister's banquet...

On my left I found the dumb wife of the Minister, but on my right sat the young and attractive wife of the Charge d'Affaires of Scandalasia who was himself bald and bloodless like a peeled turnip. The Ambassador of Serpentinia was a widower, and the wife of the Ambassador of Burma had not joined him for lack of accomodation. I learnt the Ambassador of Bambia had been invited, but was unable to attend. There were a number of other guests, but names are difficult to remember at the first meeting.

The decoration on the table consisted of a crouching cat waiting to pounce on a rat in a jungle of flowers, trailed by a venomous serpent.

'How nice and thoughtful, Excellency,' I could not help complimenting the Minister across the table, waving my arm at the same time in the direction of the cat, feeling flattered at the special attention he had given to the decoration.

'All in your honour, Mr Ambassador', he replied as a grin spread over his face. The other guests looked up with suppressed amusement, and began to whisper to their neighbours, wondering if the remark was made as a mere formality, or carried some hidden significance. But why the serpent, I said to myself, and put it down to a love of realism. Are they not found in the jungle?

Dinner began with *pot age des potates avec V essence du volaille,* followed by *Caille roti en sauce auoc canards sausages* and *du pain d'herbe gras a minces papier.*

'What delicious quail,' I said taking a mouthful. It was years since I had tasted one. 'My compliments, Madame,' I said to the Minister's wife, 'what wonderful cooking.' But she said nothing, and had to be nudged by her neighbour. My spirts were dampened; but the pretty lady on my right addressed me:

'Have you quail in your country, Monsieur l'Ambassa- deur?'

'Ah oui, Madame. Mais les chats...' I felt so happy after a long time that I burst into French unconsciously, but thought better of my shaky knowledge of the language, and added in English 'But I have found the best ones here.'

'Really? What do you think of them?'

'Delicious, delicious, *comme vous...'*

A deep blush spread over her face. The Ambassador of Sefpentinia winked at the envoy of Burma, and the eyes of the lady's husband were focussed sharply on me. But the Minister intervened:

'We can send plenty to your country, Excellency.'

'But alas, the cats, the cats, Mr Minister.'

'Oh well, perhaps we could discuss the barter...'

The Ambassador of Serpentinia pricked his ears at mention of the barter, and glanced at his Counsellor who sat almost opposite. I did not like this exchange of glances. It did not augur well for the deal I was planning with Ratisan. For my country and Serpentinia had close associations in rivalry, both under the same rulers and since independence. I had known the Ambassador in the past, and when I had called on him had said: 'I am a soldier. If you fire a shot, I shall reply with a volley. So, look out. It won't serve any purpose to wash dirty linen in public. If you rinse a shirt, I shall bring out the dishes. Only our hands will be soiled. But if you think that would meet the ends of diplomacy, well and good. Otherwise I am ready. Roll up your sleeves.'

He had laughed amicably and said: 'We are colleagues. If you wish so, let's avoid the scandal.'

And we came to an understanding. But as in war, so in diplomacy, everything is fair. This could not amount to more than an uneasy truce. There was no harm in making agreements, so long as we did not promise to honour them as well...

All this passed through my brain like a stray bullet, and a feeling of satisfaction

filled my being. Perhaps it was caused by the lady on my right. Turning to her I asked: 'What was that rhyme? I can't remember exactly:

Tit for tat, remember that
You kill my dog, I kill your cat,'

'I'd sooner faint than remember poetry.'

'Why, you dislike it? In fact, so do I. I can't stand the sight of those lean, long-haired men with drooping eyes and reedy voices.'

'Oh dear, no. I think they are quite charming. Only verses slip my memory.'

'They have never seen a battle. If they did, they would forget their coughing and bleating.'

'You are too hard on them, really. They are so gentle they would never hurt a living thing.'

'Yet they kill their rivals with bitter words, and their sweethearts with sugary epithets. They will never find room in Paradise for the lies they tell.'

'Good gracious me, Monsiuer l'Ambassadeur. Your description of them makes me laugh. But I don't think they would like to go to Paradise. They would prefer Hell for being full of the most interesting people. Poets used to frequent my mother's salon at home, and sit at my feet and lisp. I loved them for the nice things they said and how they hated Paradise which, they asserted, was going to be full of the dullest men of this earth...'

I felt a sudden pang, and wished I were a poet too. But the Minister had stood up in his seat to propose a toast. When he finished, the Ambassador of Serpentinia should have replied on behalf of the guests being the senior-most diplomat among those present. But he suggested, with his tongue in his cheek, I thought, that I should do so being the latest acquisition to the Diplomatic Corps of Micea. I protested, but they all clapped and clamoured that I should speak. Even my fair companion took their side, and said persuasively: 'Why don't you?'

It seemed I needed no further persuasion and, placing my serviette on the table, I stood up, my heart beating like the pistons of a two-tonner. It had never done so on the field of battle. Her eyes, however, reigned influence on me, and I took courage in both hands, cursing the Serpentinian Ambassador secretly.

'Mr Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,' I began. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, my

friend and colleague the Ambassador of Serpentinia has delivered the baby to me. I mean, delegated the duty entrusted to him. I'm a soldier, no speaker, to lavish the compliments that should be showered after a sumptuous dinner with such delicate taste, er, delicious quail. Ratisan is good hunting ground, and we Ambassadors are silent viewers of the game, delivering the outcome to our headquarters. We mean no offence. We are the sort of people who say many things, but do not mean apy of them. In other words, we are harmless chaps, busy eating and entertaining, for we have nothing much to do, unless backbiting be an occupation.

'We have seen today at this table, Excellency, a demonstration of the great tradition of your hospitality; as well as your desire to be pregnant with persuasive ideas of dealing with your friends. All I can say in the end is: Here's to the success of the cats with the rats even though trailed by a sneaking serpent, and to your health Monsieur le Ministre and Madame...'

Everyone clapped as I resumed my seat, and the lovely lady said with much admiration, her eyes scintillating and giving me a message of much to follow: 'You were wonderful, Monsieur I'Ambassadeur. I never thought you were such a fine speaker.'

The Burmese Ambassador congratulated me across the table. But the face of the Serpentinian Ambassador had fallen. I could not think of any reason for his annoyance. I had said nothing to offend him. I put it down to simple jealousy.

After the dinner there was a melee. I was talking to a Ratisanian beauty, and my eyes were riveted to her breast- flaps. How I wanted to probe their secret contours! A thrill of excitement went through my body. She was the first Ratisanian woman I had met.

'We have heard a lot about you,' she said, looking quizzically full into my eyes. I was both pleased and surprised.

'But I have been here only a short time,' I remarked.

'O, the drums of Micea carry news fast and far.... And how do you like my country?'

'Delightful, Madamoiselle; and the women are charming.'

'Do you think so? But I warn you, beware! They can be quite rapacious.'

'I like them raw

'Well, you will learn your lesson .... Good gracious me, did you hear that?'

She turned to the Change d'Affaires of Greece who was talking to the Ambassador of Serpentinia. 'Our friend likes women raw.'

'His Excellency means, the more natural they are the more attractive too.'

'No. I mean raw, like the flesh ... '

The Greek became red in the face. He was obviously no soldier, without experience of trenches and shell-shock. The Serpentinian Ambassador looked amused. Then I saw my own CDA hovering on the periphery, and felt it was time to go. The Ratisanian brushed past me again. She reminded me of an arrogant woman I had once met with pouting lips and brazen breasts. I had just passed out of the Academy then, and the Beatniks of my generation were celebrating the festival of Lucine from whom our symbol of Luna had been derived. The October moon was at the full, and lunar shadows acted like chlorodyne on nerves recovering from electric stimulation of proximity with lactating young females. I was dancing with her. It was an old-fashioned waltz. As I made a chasse she leaned back on my arm and the whole silkiness of her back was pressed against my palm, and the shapeliness of her breasts was outlined against my chest. I was thrilled with the impulse of holding her ever so close. She must have read the desire in my eyes, for she said: 'I dare you.'

I pulled her up close and kissed her on the lips. She slapped me on the face and hissed: 'Schizophrenic,' and tore herself away. The sound of the slap was lost in the syncopation of the music; and I stood alone under the moon drinking the joy of the moment to the last dregs, still wishing for more ...

All these sensations and memories whirled through my mind as I lay in bed. I had perhaps had a few drinks too many in the excitements of the day, and tossed from side to side. As I thought of the Ratisanian beauty, the image of the hotel maid came sailing before my eyes. She was not half as young and pretty; but she wore a tight-fitting dress with the intriguing breast-curtains that flapped invitingly, flapped and beckoned to say: 'Come, here lies the happiness of Paradise and all the rewards for good deeds, the Nirvana which Buddha promised, the nepenthe of the Greeks, the nectar of the Bible.'

I suppose the lactic vessels in all mammals are the same, for the young ones of each kind at least. But those of human beings have assumed a most attractive shape and appeal, not only for the suckling young, but grown-ups too. Either as a

result of some hidden fascination with lactescence or of psychosis, I could not suppress the image of the maid's breast-flaps which danced before my eyes, opening and shutting in a most hypnotic way. I tried to banish the image from my mind, but it persisted with greater intensity.

Her room was not far from mine. In fact, it was part of the suite I occupied, but had been detached from it as it opened on the main corridor at the other side of which were rooms occupied by diplomats and guests, most of them high officials. It was late, quite late, nearly eleven- thirty of the night. All the guests, and even the room boys had retired, but the light in her room was burning. I hesitated before her door, then opened it gently. She had fallen asleep dressed as she was. Her legs were narrow at the ankles and full at the shins, but I did not care. My eyes went for the breast-flaps which heaved with a gentle motion as she breathed. My hands were drawn towards them. Being ignorant of their mechanism, I lifted them up to see what they kept hidden, but saw nothing. They were sewn to the dress. So, I pressed them. They yielded to my touch like a dome of rubber, or a beach ball: She woke up and screamed...

Before I could regain the door a waiter came running to see what could have happened. I hurriedly slipped past him and reached my own door. As I entered the room the door opposite opened and I saw the Ambassador of Burma robed in Adam's dress, peeping through the opening...

I could hardly sleep; and when I came to the Chancery in the morning, I had a peculiar feeling that everyone was looking at me askance. On my table I found specks of dust, and my papers were slightly disarranged. I called the orderly and took off some dust on my finger and said: 'Why didn't you clean my room?'

'I do, Master, but I do again.'

He brought a duster, but left more dust on the wood from the dirty cloth. I snatched it from his hand and threw it into his face.

'Get out,' I shouted.

'Yes, I go, I go now,' he said and started backing out of the room, but bent down to pick up the duster. I took a paper weight, and was about to throw it at him when the Chancellor entered with some papers, and was flabbergasted to see me in the act. But for his entry I would have smashed the fellow's head.

The Chancellor turned back to go, but I said indignantly: 'Who looks after the cleaning of my office?'

'The orderlies,' he said in a frightened voice.

'And no one bothers to see what the orderlies do? How wonderful to leave things to themselves! Prepare a roster of duties, and see that my room is cleaned properly. That's your duty.'

'Yes, Sir,' he said and bowed low. Then he put the papers on my table and hesitated.

'What else do you want?'

'There's a woman, Sir. She says she wants to see you. I told her she can't, but she says she works in the hotel. Pardon me, Sir, I can't pronounce its name. She says it is urgent.'

'Where is she now?

'I took her to CDA; but she says she must see you.'

'Ask CDA to see me.'

When he came in, I asked CDA what the woman wanted.

'Her story sounds all queer to me,' he replied. 'In the beginning she wouldn't say anything. Eventually she said that she was assaulted last night, and by you.'

'Rubbish. I only went to her room to ask for coffee.'

'But according to her there are a number of witnesses, and that the Ambassador of Burma saw it too.'

'Nonsense. I've never heard of such a thing.'

'I tried to talk her out of it, but she is adamant, and says if she does not get satisfaction she will go to the Foreign Office. I had half a mind to call in the Police.'

'Why didn't you? She is trying to blackmail.'

'But think of the scandal it would create. The Police will only side with her, and call in witnesses. The newspapers will get hold of the story and our name will be muck.'

'Let her go to the Foreign Office then. What can they do?'

'Nothing of course. But the story will get round all the same, and if there is any substance in her allegation, it could be very damaging. I suggest you talk to her

yourself.'

I wanted to avoid that situation, and asked him to settle the matter as best he could. It took him the whole morning to negotiate with her. She hung on like a leech. At long last it was arranged that I shall pay her five hundred dollars; but CDA was clever enough to make her sign a bond that she would leave the service of the Hotel and never show up there again It was only when I received a communication from the Ministry of Trade and Commerce saying that they would like to discuss the question of the supply of cats, that I could put her out of mind.

5

When the negotiations began I was not required to be present. It was only a preliminary meeting. But I was not certain of CDA's ability to negotiate. Fearing that he might make a mess of the deal, I decided to go with him.

The Ratisanians were not prepared for my participation, and tried to dissuade me from coming. CDA, who telephoned, was told that the discussion was going to be a routine one that it would only inconvenience me, as neither the Minister, nor even the Vice Minister, was going to attend the meeting. I suspected some sort of conspiracy between CDA and the Ratisanians, and said that I would go only as observer. I did not wish to miss any part of the discussions. It was, after all, my deal.

The meeting was held in the Ministry of Commerce, and was attended by the Assistant Director of Foreign Trade with two junior officers. The Assistant Director opened the discussion with the remarks, addressed to CDA: 'We understand you have cats that are capable of eating rats and wiping out the menace we are faced with. We have tried various remedies, like traps, pesticide, etc., but the rodent population has only increased instead of diminishing. We have avoided the use of poison for fear of destroying other useful life. If you think your cats are capable of destroying the rats, we would like to know at what rate they would be able to kill them off.'

CDA was looking quizzically, with a smile of amusement on his face. With a twinkle in his eyes he replied in a manner which showed he knew the subject better than his audience and had fullest confidence in himself: 'You know that cats belong to the feline species, *felis domesticus,* to be exact. They are small,

domesticated, furry, carnivorous quadrupeds, and are kept as pets and to destroy mice...'

'Let me warn you, Mr Charge d'Affaires,' interrupted the Assistant Director, forgetting that CDA was only a Secretary and not in charge of the Mission, that our rats are not mice. They are bigger, much bigger, both vegetarian and carnivorous. They can eat up birds like green finches and budgerigars, and even pigeons. From your opening remarks I feel that your cats would prove inadequate against our rats. They are capable of attacking civets, which we used to catch fo extract musk from their anal glands for medicinal purposes. But we found their numbers decreasing with the result that our doctors found it difficult to obtain this aromatic substance which was used for curing piles, a common disease among our religious minority which is fond of sitting on its haunches, a habit that induces this inconvenient malady. The doctors were worried, and approached the Government for giving protection to this genus of quadrupeds, and to declare them an essential commodity, and to ban their trapping without a licence which, they emphasised, should be given only to medical practitioners or their authorised agents. The Government promised to look into their demand sympathetically, and instituted an enquiry into the disappearance of civets.

'About the same time, the farmers reported that their granaries smelt strongly of musk. The doctors rushed to the farms with traps and other contraptions for catching them, but found no civets. On the other hand, they found rat droppings which smelt strongly of musk. They were rather intrigued. One of the doctors had an idea that musk was also found in some variety of rodents. He secretly caught some, as destruction of rats was prohibited at that time. But through he found traces of its smell, no musk was discovered. When he kept the rats on a vegetarian diet for a few days, even the smell disappeared. In the course of his search the doctor came upon the carcase of a civet in a hollow, and near it rodent droppings with musky smell. That led to the conclusion that rats could kill even an animal as big as a civet...'

I was feeling lost in a jungle, and looked anxiously at CDA, as I began to fear that my deal may end at the very inception. But CDA seemed unruffled. If anything, he looked more amused.

'What hppened to the doctors' demand?' he asked, instead of putting some relevant question, which annoyed me.

'The Government accepted the researching doctor's findings. That is one of

the many reasons which led to the decision for the destruction of rats.'

'And the musk?' he asked, as it were with his tongue in his cheek.

'We had to import it from China. It was terribly expensive and we had to pay for it in precious foreign exchange. And then it did not have the same efficacy being taken out of the preputial glandular pouch of a genus of ruminants, and not from the anal glands which, somehow, impart to the civet musk its peculiar medicinal quality. We have man-aged to save some civets and are keeping them in closely grilled areas so that they could multiply and we could become independent of China again for our supplies of musk. That is why we would like to know the size and capacity of your cats.'

'Actually,' CDA replied, 'there are two kinds of them. The wild variety is found in Great Britain which is bigger than the *felis domesticus.* But over and above the domesticated variety we have a third which is a hybrid, a cross between the British and ours, which lives on the outskirts of our cities, and is more devastating than the other two having the traits of both, the sleekness of one and the felinity of the other.'

I was getting nervous. This did not explain either the characteristics or the ability of our cats. To salvage my deal from the scientific mess it was getting into, I intervened: 'Let me explain, Excellency. Our cats belong to the same species as lions and leopards. They are not sissies like civets. They are as big as Samoyeds and more agile than fox terriers. When at night they moan and miaow and caterwaul, the rats die of fright. Women have been known to yield up babies prematurely hearing their ferocious cater* wauling. They can bewitch rats as a bull terrier I once had used to hypnotise cats by barking in a voice of a certain pitch and frequency until the cat fell off the tree and he caught her by the neck and bashed her on the ground. They would be the right remedy for your menace...'

'The bull terrier or the cats?' the Assistant Director asked impertinently.

'The cats,' CDA rejoined, 'if your rats are the size of rodents, and the bull terrier if they are as big as cats.'

Everyone laughed including myself, suddenly finding release from the tension which had gripped us. At the same time, coffee was brought in which served as a refreshing break. When we resumed the session the only tricky question asked was about the speed with which the cats would be able to kill the rats, to which

CDA replied: 'At the same speed as your civets multiplied after being killed for their musk.'

The arithmetic involved in the answer nonplussed the Ratisanians. Things were easy after that. The talks centred round minor details about the number available, the price per head, and the time required to deliver them. As I had no idea about all this, I held a private parley with CDA, then told them that we would have to ask our Government, and get in touch with them as soon as we had a reply.

I was quite pleased with the day.

CDA said: 'Didn't I pull his leg?'

'Of course, that was the only possible line.'

He had looked quite enthusiastic, but recoiled back at the coldness of my remark. I sent off a telegraphic cypher message, giving details of the meeting and requesting an immediate reply to the queries made by the Ministry of Commerce. I emphasised how the deal was in our interests and would raise our prestige in Ratisan, as well as earn for us foreign exchange and open the door for trade with the country...

And now that I had leisure I thought of the secret experiments the Kharosan Ambassador was reported to be making. Stories one heard had seldom any substance. Moreover, I was getting suspicious of diplomacy which was a convivial association of representatives of countries for entertaining each other at Government expense, and for spying on their confreres secretly, disregarding the principle of loyalty to those whose precious salt and wine they consumed. CDA believed that its art and finesse consisted in stabbing as softly in the back as the silent liquefaction of a damsel's clothes. The most successful cheated with the sangfroid of a heartless woman. Those who were honest and sincere, were either pushed into the background or demoted or retired for failing to tell amusing or successful lies. CDA may have been trying out his cynical theories to put me on the wrong track So, I made an appointment with the Kharosan Ambassador to discuss his experiments with him.

6

The Kharosan Embassy was housed in a palatial building symbolising the

greatness of the past and Kharosa's present might. I was led up twenty marble steps into a colonnaded hall with full-size portraits of the dead ancestors of Kharosa. On the bare wall opposite hung an oversize painting of the living leader of the land presiding over each whisper and passing shadow that crossed the building. I could imagine him watching the secret plotting for the abduction of the Vice Foreign Minister. I had learnt from Toon-toon that she was a nymphomaniac and fond of men above the age of forty with a reputation for profligacy. The Kharosans had themselves brought over a ballet dancer with a terrific reputation among women, to bait her. It seemed for a while that she had fallen. They were seen together at the beaches and the theatre. My own First Secretary had hovered round her, I learnt, and even she found some strange attraction in him for a while; but the worm had stood no chance. Even the ballet dancer proved too sophisticated, and fell from favour in view of the onslaught of the crude though manly Touche le Beau who had hair on his arms and chest like a bear. How did the ghostly father of the nation react then? I wondered, as I threw another glance at the portrait, envious of his knowledge and power even in paint.

The Ambassador was waiting in a glass-panelled room and stood up to shake hands with me. He was tall and well- built but rather handsome, with arched eye-brows and hazel- coloured eyes through which, however, one could not see as they looked impenetrable. I was surprised to hear a twitter of budgerigars, and saw a cage on a table with blue and white Chinese pots for food and drink.

fI thought, Excellency,' I said, settling down in a plush sofa, 'it was considered decadent in your country to keep pets and have hobbies.'

'Not more decadent,' he replied good-humouredly, 'than the desire to probe the secret of things you see but do not understand—the dress of Ratisanian women, for instance, although the instinct behind it is understandable.'

Was he hinting at the incident of the hotel maid? I felt my ears tingle, the blood mount to my cheeks. But there was no sign of a jeer in his tone, and I dismissed the thought. We had similar tastes, it seemed.

'Canaries are the birds to keep,' I observed, as I felt certain the Ambassador's interest in birds was innocent, and that CDA's surmise about secret experiments was only malicious gossip.

-That would be decadent, Mr Ambassador,' he replied, 'for canaries! are romantic, and act on the bourgeois emotions. Budgerigars are sociable. In fact, I

keep them for a study in behaviour. They are more amenable to discipline, and conform to known patterns which human beings do not do. I want to control their twitter as well as their brains, so that the mystery is removed. You see, the brain is a radio-active substance and keeps the conscious and subconscious' iii balance. If there is disturbance somewhere, the radio-active waves which communicate messages from the one to the other lose what we call contact inhibition, and go astrayt Without setting the radio-active system right you cannot make them work, like relations between two countries.'

'As those between yours and Samia?' I said, making a slip.

'The imbalance there,' he coolly remarked, 'is due rather to a divergence of approach. If you can see through the common instinct all interests of human beings are the same- proportion between capacity and need. The Samians have reduced it to exploitation of labour. In other words, they have refused to control the brain away from primitive desires and anarchy of behaviour; and class antagonisms clash in their society. We have learnt to discipline the masses by controlling their radio-active brains. If you take away the flaps from the dress of Ratisanian women, as you know, only breasts will remain. The Samians take them with the flaps. Hence the mystery and the illusion, which they perpetrate. We like the reality without any trappings. This cannot be achieved without directing the vision through proper levelling. We, therefore, work from within, by abolishing all distinctions between classes and men. They act; from without, by superimposing their superiority both of power and money, though they call it a more orderly society and higher state of civilisation. Our system rests on revolution, theirs on competition though they call it evolution,'

'That's most interesting,' I said, much impressed. 'I had never thought of it in that light.'

'Not more interesting than the desire of lunatics to do away with the reality of external things, or of budgerigars for food and drink and laying eggs,' he observed seriously.

I could not help laughing; but the Ambassador went on unconcerned: 'I have not yet succeeded in controlling the birds' behaviour, especially that of the female who is an instinctive drone. Whenever she is hatching she never comes out of the nest, and the male takes food to her in his beak and feeds her. That is wrong, all wrong, Mr Ambassador. Each one must labour irrespective of his needs.'

"But then, Excellency,' I said, remembering Aunt Zerima-ger saying that a

woman who could not produce at least a dozen children was ill-born, 'the female is performing a natural function, of propagating the species. Does she not deserve a little pampering?'

. 'That is a bourgeois luxury, and must be eliminated. Working men can't afford it. The peasant women of India know better. When the pains start they go behind a bush, give birth to the baby, and away they walk with it. They have no leisure for such tomfoolery, nor inclination for being spoonfed by others, as some countries wish to do.'

This led to a discussion on the foreign policy of Ratisan and the menace of rats. The views expressed by the Kharosan Ambassador were surprisingly similar to those expounded by CDA. But the Ambassador's assessment was very profound. He was far abler than Sir Broadguage Blooming- field, who seemed a mere student by his side. I could not follow a good deal of what he said, but he was clearly annoyed with Ratisanians for eating out of Samia's hand and refusing the help that Kharosa had offered.

'We would have eradicated the menace for them,' he said. 'But they don't want to free themselves of their shibboleths in spite of having gained independence which is only skin deep, as the taboos are left untouched by the rulers to keep the people in darkness and tutelage. The luxury of Faith, like Democracy, is too easy and convenient than a controlled and disciplined form of governance. Similarly is the way of Christian Mercy easier than the Hebraic Law or Islamic Justice which is unrelenting and hard, like the policies of Russia and China, being based on actions, while Mercy is softened with the concession of Grace which relieves the yoke of its burden and makes the law of Reality Unnecessary, like the policy of USA, which weaves a web of alignment and aid, and lulls the backward states into being relieved of the burden of labour and thought, the great illusion of being well deceived.

'The Ratisanians, having lost their sense of identity under the deintellectualising rule of Christian Imperialism, have preferred the easier way of the devil you know is better than the devil you do not know, and remained in subjugation to the same imperialist designs from which they had fought to free themselves, by accepting aid and advice from Samia. And Samia, like USA, uses them to exert pressure and force." We appreciate countries that are independent and follow a neutral line.'

Was this the reason why he was so friendly towards me? In any case, we

happened to be following then a policy that did not favour Samia exclusively.

'But there is no such thing as a neutral policy,' I observed, remembering CDA's briefing on the subject. 'It does not exist. You see, Excellency, it takes more than one country to evolve a foreign policy. There are one's neighbours against whom one either has a grouse or with whom one is on friendly terms on the basis of common hopes and fears vis-a-vis a third power. If youare stronger than your neighbour, then you want to align yourself with stronger nations and devour the weaker countries. If you are weak, or a small country, or call it a developing country, you have to appease the big powers that have made a show of helping you by persuasive or voluntary means or coercion. Increasing population and industrialisation place you at the mercy of the West which alone has the wherewithal and know-how of technical advance as well as scientific knowledge and machinery. In order to become self-sufficient we must depend on countries that are both well-equiped and willing to help. We have, therefore, to ally ourselves with them. In doing so we automatically sacrifice neutrality,'

I was surprised at my ability to recall a briefing given in passing, and to argue on such matters as foreign policy. But I felt it was so easy. Was not the Ambassador of Kharosa himself feeding me with arguments?

'And sell yourself to Samia?' he said with sarcasm. 'Do you know how much interest Ratisan will have to pay to Samia oisthe loan advanced for buying pesticide from Samia's own manufacturers? Colossal, Mr Ambassador. The debt amounts to nearly twenty-five dollars per head of the population already. Morever, the strings attached to the loan are extra. It's pawning the liberty of freedom for ever.'

'Yet if they borrow from the other powers, would they not be binding themselves in equal, measure though in a different way? No, Excellency, you can't have the best of both worlds, eat your cake and have it too. There is no neutralism for the weaker countries, unless you mean by it the trick of grabbing aid from all sources and kicking all of them in the pants when the time comes. But can they ever become so strong as to be able to do that? Japan did, and was licked after the War both by Russia and America. No, Mr Ambassador, the weaker nations must limp along, limp and limp, now on this leg, now on the other...'

It was his turn to laugh; and he pressed a glass of neat brandy into my hand which went down the throat all burning my chest. Having gulped it down I

suddenly realised it was late, and said goodbye, exhilirated and full of a spirit of camaraderie born of the *esprit de corps* inherent in the Corps Diplomatique....

7

That was the Kharosan Ambassador, secret, persuasive. What would his rival in diplomacy be like? I wondered. I had not met the Ambassador of Samia as he was out of Ratisan at the time of my presenting the credentials, and only just returned.

He turned out to be different when I met him on his return from Samia where he had gone for consultations. In his absence his Counsellor, then acting as Charge d'Affaires, had called on me. He was a pale and sickly looking person with a long nose which had the habit of running quite frequently, and to wipe which he kept a neatly folded handkerchief. This rather annoyed me, especially because he invariably performed this slow operation every time I asked him a relevant question either about the Ambassador's absence or his opinion of Ratisan or on political matters. On the other hand, he boasted about his origin and talked of how he had risen from the lowest strata. No wonder he kept a ten cent rag in his inner pocket. I disinfected myself after he left.

The Ambassador was immaculately dressed in a dark blue terylene suit that seemed to sit easy on his shoulders, but the lapel was too narrow and the trousers were Edwardian* He was tall, very tall and lanky, with a look of unconcern about him, almost of condescension. In fact, as I thought of him, he seemed to be a dead man walking, or to whom everything around was dead, so expressionless was his face. His appearance seemed to fit his name, Buddy Bagatale. I thought it was written Bag-a-tail, but it proved otherwise, and reminded me of the saying: 'And thereby hangs a tale', or was it tail? The English language being what it is, it's difficult to tell.

The room he received me in was a hall with stairs winding up to the upper floor in one corner, and a large grey carpet covering the entire space, and sofas and divans lining the walls on which hung paintings and reproductions of European masters. The central place was occupied by one of Van Gogh which I had seen at the Academy, a self portrait with his ear bandaged, having been painted after he had cut it off and sent to the barmaid he was in love with as a present. But I felt the painting had just been fyung up there— was it for me to see? I wondered—for the space around it showed signs of a larger picture having

been removed to make room for it. What struck me most, however, was the fact that the entrance as well as the doors leading from the hall were reinforced with double leaves of wire netting similar to the one which covered the compound wall of his manorial bungalow from the ground to a height of nearly eight feet, with a strip of galvanized iron sheet curving upwards along the entire length. I could not understand the purpose for which they had been fixed there. The mesh was too wide for mosquitos and flies, and could have been useful only in an aviary. I looked for birds in the room, but there was no sign of any. Perhaps he kept them in the garden uncaged. Maybe he had discovered the secret of radioactivity, and controlled them through the radar in his brain. Did not a rivalry exist between his country and Kharosa for mastery over the secrets of Science and Life? Which brought back to my mind CDA's philosophy of Good and Evil and Harmony.

'In man's experience,'he had said, 'it is Evil that triumphs and succeeds in reversing man's fate or destiny, even though through a flaw in the character of man himself. Philosophically, Good viewed as Harmony must succeed. Yet, in spite of Christ it was Evil that triumphed in the end. For did not Jesus fail in the very moment of his success? And did not God himself aquiesce in the will of Satan and Beelzebub? When Shih Huang-ti stood at the altar of Heaven and Earth and sacrificed to appease the forces of Nature, he was really worshipping the principle of Harmony from which both light and darkness emanate. Good and Evil are born of the same principle. They are a pair of identical twins, one black one white, enclosed within the same circle, like two foetuses head to toe, distinguishable yet merged into a unity. What we call Good may only be short-lived—Communism or Democracy. None has led, anyway, to the enrichment of life, not merely of individuals, but humanity as such. For when you come to think of both they are an extended form of Capitalism, Democracy practising it in the name of the people, allowing the capitalists freedom to fatten on others, and Communism practising it as the state become capitalist in the name of the proletariat, usurping the freedom of the individual to fatten but permitting him the liberty to grow lean in the cause of the Party and class-consciousness.'

'You are a sceptic,' I had told him. 'This does not qualify you for diplomacy.' His eyes had become enlarged, his colour had faded—a condition I had noticed in schizophrenics, whose gaze is fixed on a far object. Before my vision was also its goal. It was a question of his brilliance or my career. But he was right. There seemed no good in the world to reinforce the good, whereas evil clashed with evil

constantly, as my regiment had faced that of the enemy. If I had succeeded the enemy's regiment would have become the Regiment of Routs. But that was not so. In my religious background was an impressed fear of God, not of Satan, as I came to think of it. If God was good, as I had been taught to believe, why was fear of the good hammered into the brain? In CDA's view good was the greatest evil, for no one practised it on this earth. Everyone seemed to repeat the name of God, he said, in church and temple, the synagogue and mosque; but everyone worshipped his own self or Moloch alone. God did not exist at all then, for only the voice of Satan was heard and reverberated in the spheres, CDA observed, and the sun chased the stars and the moon, and the eclipse the sun, the night the day, in a never-ending race of death. How quickly I had traversed unimaginable ground without even winking an eye.

Yet my mind was a jumble of philosophy. I could no longer make out what: was God good and Good evil? I felt convinced of the Kharosan Ambassador's theory of the brain being a radio-active substance. What is more, I felt certain of its radial power as emanating from the hidden radar. Where was it located, I wondered—the pituitary gland or the soul? I decided the sperm, for it was capable of creating new life out of disintegrating cells. And suddenly the revelation came that the Hebrew word Moloch was derived from the Sanskrit Malich—or was it the other way round?— meaning dirty which, my holy book said, the sperm was. Life was born hence of evil; and certainly the Samian Ambassador had fitted up electronic devices in the wire netting to intercept the Kharosan Ambassadors' thoughts. CDA was wrong. There was no struggle between good and evil. It was a combat between evil and evil for begetting more evil and anarchy. And I thought of the war in Vietnam where America was locked up with Russia in a struggle for supremacy and, with her underlings bought up with aid, like the characters of the underworld with dollars, wished to contain the rising tide of China and Ho Chi Minh... Communism and Democracy.

'What do you think of the Vietnamese problem, Excellency?' I asked, still lost in the deep recesses of my brain. He must have been surprised, for that was almost the first sentence I had spoken. But he did not even turn a hair, and looked at me vacant-eyed.

'Vietnamese problem?' he repeated. 'Is there a Vietnamese problem? Many people believe there are flying saucers which bring creatures like us from the other worlds. I never thought anything of them. Similarly with Vietnam. I

thought America was trying to keep Russia and Communism in abeyance and to contain China. It was conquest or death. It is outside my sphere, of course; but if you have some problem about the country, I could make enquiries for you. You were not posted to Saigon?' he asked in such a way that I took it for a query.

'Not exactly. But I saw action in that general area.'

'Of course,' he said as though remembering. 'In the Battle of Frogs. But tell me about China. You were connected with it.'

'That was my father. I have never been to that country, although I am most interested in it.'

I began to feel uneasy. He had put me the dock, and was trying to examine me. And he knew my background, but how? I wondered. Through electronic devices or the radar? Then everything would be known to him, the affair of the maid as well as negotiations about the deal. To get out of the suffocation I felt, I asked him a straight question: 'I have been wondering, Excellency, about the purpose of the wire netting both inside and along the compound wall of your residence.

'We had to put it up for protection,' he replied.

'Against thieves?' I asked. 'I did not think there were so many in the city.'

'Against rats,' he replied.

'But why in the city? I know the rats are the biggest menace of the country, but they romp the fields and forests.'

'Not altogether,' he said. 'They have started invading the cities, specially since the use of pesticides has been stepped up in areas adjoining the city, and they have started looking for more wholesome food in Micea.'

'That could become explosive.' I remarked, 'What is the extent of the damage done by rats?'

'They devour more grain in the field than we supply to Ratisan in a year. Now that you are negotiating the deal. I can show you a press report which may be of interest to you.'

He went to his study to get the paper he had mentioned. And I said to myself: he knows. How cleverly he had informed me that he knew about the deal. When he came back and gave me the report, I learnt many things no one had told me. It said in brief that Samia had given 3.2 million tons of grains to Ratisan in six

months and was expected to give another million during the coming half year. The Samian Department in charge of the development of developing countries had asked the Ratisanian Government to supply an objective appraisal of the situation, but had received no reply. They had lent the services of a rodent control expert to Ratisan and sent advisers on agriculture, who speculated that Ratisan had nearly 650 million rats, four times more than Ratisan's population of 160 million people. The rats, the report said, were thought to consume more than 200 million bushels of cereal grain.

The Ratisanian Government, of course, did not agree with the report. Samian experts familiar with the situation said that ten per cent of Ratisan's production of 30 million tons in a year was lost through handling in the field where it was produced, and amounted to the quantity of grain sent by Samia to Ratisan. The Micean authorities declared the estimate of losses grossly exaggerated, and said there was a bounty paid for killing rats in most areas and that rodents were no longer placed in the category of sacred animals. Yet, the report went on to assert, a large section of Ratisanian population was still averse to killing rats. In spite of the insistence of Samian officials that more could be done with pesticide to help Ratisan feed her millions without dependence on foreign aid, the question of cost and persuading God-minded and hide-bound farmers to use chemical pesticides remained...

Within a few days of this conversation, the controversy broke over Micea like a wind-storm. The pro-Government newspapers splashed the news in banner headlines that the growing number of rats in the country had endangered the nation's health. The Opposition press accused the Government of sleeping while the rats devoured as much food as Samia gave in aid. The neutral press played up the deliberate ineffectiveness of Samian pesticide in the interests of larger shipments of grain. The religious papers voiced fear of a conspiracy hatched by Kharosa, to kill the sacred population of rodents, a symbol of the country's ancient past and glory.

The Corps Diplomatique was disturbed. I was dining informally with the Ambassador of France. The Ambassador seemed to take the affair in his stride, with diplomatic nonchalance; but his wife was visibly perturbed.

'How terrible, Mr Ambassador,' she said. 'Of course you know what it means to us women.'

I pricked up my ears at the phrase. How did it affect the women? I could not

understand. 'I know, Madame,' I said, 'mice are such slimy creatures, but they are so intelligent. I have always felt sorry for the mouse under the Queen's chair the naughty cat frightened away in London. She must have eaten it up, of course. There's no better remedy for the rats, or useless humanity as a matter of that, than to use them as fodder for hungry guns.'

The Ambassador laughed sardonically, but his wife remarked: 'How bad you are to lump rats and human beings together. You haven't heard what happened to the Dutch Consul's daughter? Oh dear, it was terrible. We must have our Embassy grilled at once. But my husband is sceptical and says it was imagination, a sort of flying saucer scare. I am now afraid of going out alone in the dark. They must do something about it.'

'What happened to the Consul's daughter?' I asked, my curiosity aroused.

'O my! It was terrible. The poor girl is only nineteen, and so pretty too. She happened to be in a state of dishabille when of all things two black rats came in from somewhere and started staring at her. She ran inside, but they followed her. She ran to the dressing room and bolted the door. In a minute the rats appeared at the dressing-room window. As she reached for her dress, she saw the two black brutes ogling and gazing lewdly, fluttering their mous- tachios. She screamed and fainted. They had to break open the door to reach her.

'How terrible,' I said, feeling sorry for the girl 'I must send them flowers with my compliments.'

The Swiss Minister, who was an old friend of theirs, was announced. He was a confirmed bachelor, short, bald and clean-shaven, and resembled the painting of a musician I had seen.

'How is the school of fish?' the host inquired. That seemed a new angle on diplomacy. What had a school of fi$h to do with a Minister Plenipotentiary?

'They are flourishing,' he replied with a beaming smile.

I took it as a code word for some political wrangle over the rats. Finding me look bewildered, the host turned to me: 'His Excellency's goldfish spawned and hatched a thousand little fish.'

'Did they really? How wonderful. But I thought they bred in lakes and rivers,' I remarked sceptically.

They all smiled, and a grin spread from jaw to jaw on the Minister's face, 'But

they have bred in the Minister's pond,' explained the host. 'One morning the Minister's servants came and announced the birth, and were suitably rewarded for the news. It was a fit occasion, for never in the history of a diplomatic mission had such a thing ever happened before.'

'Don't forget us, Excellency,' I could not help saying, 'the day you serve them.'

Everyone laughed except the Minister who seemed hurt by the remark. Seeing the expression on his face the hostess changed the topic of conversation. 'Has there been any fresh development on the rat front?'

'The Evening Scandal,' said the Minister,'had an interesting cartoon of Touche le Beau with the Vice Foreign Minister, frisking his whiskers and stepping on a paper entitled "Foreign Policy".'

'Poor Touche le Beau,' sighed the hostess. 'How nice he was with his witty remarks and his pride in his country which, he insisted, had developed a society in which distinctions between high and low did not exist, and where even a person from the gutter had an opportunity to rise in social esteem.'

That is why he eloped with a leading lady, I thought to myself, feeling jealous of the man his youth, but said nothing.

'My Number One Boy brought rather an absurd story,' the Minister continued, 'which he had heard from the Number Two Boy of the Portugese Embassy, that a rat had jumped into his mistress' bed last night.'

'Oh dear, no,' exclaimed the hostess. 'She is so sweet, a perfect darling. I must telephone her at once, and find out how she is. Life is becoming unbearable.' And she made a gesture to get up, but her husband intervened.

'I shall ask him tomorrow,' he said. 'We have a meeting. I am sure it is wild gossip.'

'Where is it going to end?' she said anxiously. 'I am so frightened that I wish to go away. Why can't you seek protection and ask the Foreign Office for a Police guard?'

'It will all blow over,' said the host. 'Shall we go in for dinner, my dear?'

8

The first thing that caught my eye when Lopened *The Hot Ball* in the morning

was a cartoon on the front page which showed the President as a sleepy old rat yawning, while the caption said: 'O sleep, beloved from pole to pole.' The editorial accused the Government of playing into the hands of imperialists and selling away the country.

The rats seemed to have got news of what was happening and were not much behind others in registering their protest. A news item in the same paper said that rats had set fire to a building by gnawing a package of matches, gutting it and destroying several thousand dollars worth of goods.

Politicians admitted there was lack of initiative and response among the public men in raising a clamour for a drive to destroy rats. Some frankly criticised the authorities for having gagged the press, and the Government for depriving the people of freedom of expression which lay at the back of the silence about the fiasco. Freedom, said the leader of the Opposition now in hiding, was a precious thing, the most cherished treasure of humanity and the birthright of man. No one was superior or inferior in the eyes of God. None was different from the other, and each had been created in the Maker's image, with the same brain, from flesh and bone which were one. What right, then, had one mega-lomaniac to usurp the liberty of others and sit in judgement over his fellow men? Men's destiny was higher than all Creation, his place so exalted that the best of angels was turned out of heaven for refusing to honour Adam and bow before him. One man compared to the corporate will of man was a little worm. How then could he take upon himself the self-appointed task of controlling the direction of the vast majority's actions and will? Let such tyrants take heed, the statement warned, for the wrath of God and of man must fall in the end and they must crush their pride and arrogance under foot. No country belongs to one man, and freedom to speak one's mind and the right to shape the future in accordance with the nation's ideals must be restored forthwith, so that men could walk this earth like men and not hang their heads in shame.

The Unprivilged People's Party issued a strong statement denouncing Samia and calling upon the Goverment to sever diplomatic relations with that country. Their demands included death to the rats and restoration of democratic rule which alone could deal with the menace successfully. The Pious Persons' League called for an enquiry into the Sex Scandal in which some members of the Presidential Cabinet were recently involved. It even accused the highest personage the of land of complicity in the affair which had culminated in the elopement of the Vice Foreign Minister.

While the agitation was gaining momentum, the President returned suddenly from a tour abroad; and a doctor advanced the theory of birth control among the rats to check the growth of their population. He claimed that his remedy would be one hundred per cent effective and would be k acceptable to all sections of the populace and save the country both expense and embarrassment with other countries. The only expenditure involved was the setting up of a pharmaceutical factory for manufacturing the pills, which he said, could be done in half the aid given by Samia to Ratisan. His birth control pills, he asserted, would be effective for women too, thus resulting in a saving of foreign exchange on the import of contraceptives which was draining the country's resources.

We had a good laugh at his theory at the British Ambas-sador's reception, and speculated what steps the Government would take to stop the agitation. I overheard a few ladies discussing the subject:

'Have you read, my dear, the mad doctor's theory about birth control among rats?'

'Wasn't that funny, Anne darling? Imagine anyone sug-gesting such a thing! I never heard of birth control among rats! They must destroy the whole lot of them.'

'What angered me was the suggestion that women should take the pills too.'

'That is what I say. Women and rats have been lumped together. That's outrageous, and an insult to womankind! I suggested to my husband that he should protest to the Foreign Office.'

'How right you are, Lady Bird. My, it was time the Diplo-matic Corps did something about it. Can't they go to the President, whatever his name is, of Ratisan? Let them say whatever they like about the Ratisanian women—they are descended from rats, anyway—but to include us among them! Now, that is the last word!...'

The Portugese Press Attache brought the news that the Government had decided to take effective measures. No action had yet been taken, he said, but his information was that something was brewing and would soon happen.

This something' came in the form of a broadcast speech by the President over the national hookup. 'Restoration of democratic rule,' he said categorically, 'would endanger not only the security but the very existence of the country. If freedom of speech were restored, or changes made in the Constitution,' he

asserted, 'the flood gates of political intrigue and lawlessness would be thrown open. Let people not demand, therefore, the means of their own destruction,' his voice thundered. 'No party will be allowed to exploit the situation under any circumstances. National needs have no room for individual rights to destroy national rights. No opposition to the Government would be tolerated by me. Do not say you have not been warned. It is not for you to say what other Governments are doing, or what this Government has not done. My Government is fully capable and competent to deal with any problem. The political leaders have been allowed the liberty of freedom not for incitement but reconciliation. The least deviation from the principle will lead to stringent measures. Do not forget that we have effective methods of control. We shall always be merciful,* but remember what happened to others. We can easily eliminate dissident elements. We have done it before, and will do it again if needs be, in the interests of this land we love. So, help you God, and long live Ratisan ...' And the Radio played the full anthem:

High and low
High and low
Blow the bugles
Bugles blow
Ratisan.
May your voice
Full and joyous
Sing for ever
President
Loved rodent
May you rule
Long with iron
Hand and strong
Ratisan. Ratisan
Your skies are high
Lands so vast
May your life
Flow full and fast
Prosperous
Happy and glorious
Ratisan.
Ratisan

You love us
We love you
Love you so
High and low
Blow the bugles
Bugles blow
Ratisan....

As the last notes died away, the voice of the announcer was heard reading the gist of the speech from the Presidential Palace. This was followed by the news which said, among other things, that the President of the Unprivileged People's Party had been arrested under the emergency laws signed by the President that morning, for having violated them two days ago. The news bulletin also announced the arrest of the Secretary General of the Pious Persons' League for subversion of law and order and creating hatred of the Government established under the Constitution. The bail application of the President of the Unprivileged People's Party was rejected by the Magistrate before whom he was produced by the Police for remand. The Secretary General of the Pious Persons' League was held on an unbailable warrant.

Things were moving, it seemed, and the Diplomatic Corps began to hum with activity. The Protocol Department's telephone was always engaged, and I could not contact the Director of Intercontinental Affairs. So, I called on Sir Broadguage Bloomingfield, who was poring over some papers when I entered his office. Folding his tortoise-shell glasses he took me to the adjoining room overlooking a garden which seemed through the full length glass windows a blaze of colour with butterflies flitting from flower to flower and birds singing unconcerned with the fate of rats and men.

He was equally unconcerned with the speech of the President and the arrest of the political leaders. He did say, however, that for once the Government seemed to be bent on taking action and was in no mood to let opportunists exploit the situation.

'They have got to solve the food crisis if they wish to survive,' he said. 'The rats must be destroyed, the country modernized, or... '

He was called away to the telephone, and I decided to find out what was happening at home about my queries on the deal. Time, I felt, had come to strike the blow. When I came back to the Chancery, I sent a cable requesting an

expenditious reply, mentioning the political crisis which had developed over the persistent menace.

I had hardly finished with the cypher message when the Burmese Ambassador was announced. He was his usual self, talkative, gay, wearing not his sarong-like national dress, but a lounge suit even though the choice of colour, a dirty green, was unfortunate, as he wore with it a screeching blue necktie and yellow socks. He must have been a clerk before he became a diptomat. If I knew the secret of radio-activity or possessed the all-seeing radar, I would have known his exact background. I wished I were the Ambassador of Kharosa or of Samia, for then I too would have electronic devices hidden on my person and been living in palatial buildings furnished in styles more modern and the envy of Presidents themselves. In the absence of these luxuries. I received him in a section of my room instead of a separate reception hall.

'The situation is becoming tense,' he said. 'For once we feel something is happening. What do you think, Excellency?'

'I must say the speech of the President was strongly worded.'

'Exactly,' he remarked. 'We never thought the President was capable of any action. What do you think is going to happen?'

'Well, the problem has got to be solved. It's either the rats or the men. If the rats do not die, men will, for they eat up a good deal of food grain, more than the country produces. Their population is, after all, 650 million, and they devour nearly 290 million bushels of it out of a total of 300 million tons produced by Ratisan.'

He was obviously impressed by the figures, and remarked: 'That, Sir, is indeed colossal. I must say you have learnt a great deal about the country in the short time you have been here.'

'That is nothing. Part of the game, you know.'

'I am sure, with your superior knowledge, you have advised the Ratisanians suitably.'

'As a matter of fact, I have given the problem some thought. You see if I were in charge of the operations, I would finish off the whole race of rodents in one sweeping action, even though I had to employ an army of a hundred million.'

'What form would that take? It sounds exciting. Not for nothing have you

been a General.'

'I shall dig up the fields and farms and mow the running rats down with Sherman tanks.'

'That would be spectacular. But what would happen to the crops? Don't you think they would be destroyed?'

'That is exactly the strategy. Some rats are bound to escape, and they will find nothing to eat and die of starvation and famine, even though some men may also lose their lives in the process. They are no better than rats, anyway, and deserve to be killed for having been lazy and taken no steps to save their skins.'

'Rather drastic, Excellency. But I think the Samians have something up their sleeve. My feeling is that they are behind the President's speech.'

'Is that so? Do tell me,' I said, and moved closer to him on the sofa. He had lived in Micea much longer, and must have better sources of information.

'I don't really know. But the Serpentinian Ambassador was saying that the Samian Ambassador was seen going to the Presidential Palace soon after the President arrived.'

'What would Samia gain by that?' I asked sceptically.

'According to the Serpentinian Ambassador, who is very friendly with Col. Bullshot, the Samian Military Attache, who is a very influential person, that Samia is secretly interested in the preservation of rats.'

'What for?'

'To be able to sell more pesticide and food grain. Kharosa is said to be encouraging the Opposition in an attempt to disrupt the Government.'

'And the Samians are inciting the President to crush it. I can see. I can see the game.... '

After he had gone, I sat thinking of my deal. If what the Burmese Ambassador had said about Samian interest in the rats was true, there was little chance of selling the cats. But surely, no country could perpetrate such a wrong on another. Which reminded me of CDA's theory that America was afraid of Big Business and the Peace Scare. Could Samia be following in America's footsteps? But America virtually ruled the world: Samia was an unknown quantity. Yet the question of evil remained. If this angle on Samia was correct, then evil

undoubtedly was rampant in the world.

Not finding an answer I discussed it with CDA.

'The Burmese Ambassador was here,' I told him, 'and said that Samia was interested in the preservation of rats in this country. According to his information, it was largely to be able to sell pesticide and food grain to Ratisan.'

'That seems a correct appraisal,' he observed.

'If that is so, where is justice and humanity?'

'Justice and humanity! They are big words, Frankly, I know nothing.'

'But I am asking you,' I said with authority.

'I would tell you if I knew. Besides, you will not understand.'

'What do you mean?' Was he trying to be rude to me?

'It's much too abstruse. But what do you understand by justice and by humanity?'

That was difficult to answer, frankly; but I said: 'To treat all equally, and appreciate others' difficulties.'

'But why should one treat all equally?' he put another question.

'Because one should love all equally.'

'To love all is not possible,' he said unequivocally, 'unless one is a saint or a prophet. You cannot love the man who fornicates with your wife, or who throws dust into your eyes and confuses you, unless you can change your nature and rise above all human beings, as Jesus did, if he really did. In order to be fair you must be blind, so that you could not distinguish between one thing and another, between action and inaction, movement and calm, the wind and the tree, in short, man and man, which Jesus could not do by failing to identify himself with the Romans as he had done with his own people. Had he been born a Roman, his martyrdom would have had more meaning.

'You see, if you are weak or you are powerful, you cannot be impartial to the powerful or the weak, as when in high position you cannot give away your power to another or donate your holiness if you are a saint. Night follows day, death life, and Nature runs her appointed course. Appearances do not reflect the fundamental reality. Man cannot change the character of man.

'Justice and Love exist only in the ideal. In life they have no place. We can use the terms, at best, comparatively. If you love your own people you cannot love others in equal measure. Jesus and Gandhi are examples. If you are fair to your own countrymen you have to be unfair to those of other countries. Britain could not be fair to the Americans in the last century, and America cannot be fair to Vietnamese or Chinese without facing internal dangers and disruption of her economy. She should really contain herself instead of containing China. But that is only an ideal wish. In reality it is not so. "An enlightened ruler,'? said the Philosopher Lao Tzu, "pays attention only to facts and ideas that are of practical us& at this moment. He does not concern himself with benevolence and morality." And the ancient Chinese Realist Hsun Tzu said that "the most that a benevolent man can do is to be benevolent to others; he cannot cause others to be benevolent to him." And if Samia wants to preserve the rats in Ratisan, it is so that Samian factories should go on employing men to produce pesticide, and the farms exporting superfluous food grain which must be produced to keep peace and idle hands busy. Humanity for Samia is confined to Samians; and justice in the modern world weighs the balance to tip the scales in favour of one's own kith and kin. That is why Britain had maintained a vast empire, and America maintains a vast machinery of trade and an army to keep the wheels of industry grinding. I could go on, but that would serve no useful purpose. The real criterion is not the absolute, but the practical experience of man ....'

I felt confused. He had thrown the dust he had talked of into my eyes. So, I decided to cast off philosophy and take things in my stride.

9

Diplomatic life seemed the easiest and best. Having raved with the lunatics, having led regiments to ambuscades and routs, I could certainly dam the gulf of diplomacy. To talk among dunces and diplomats was the easiest thing to do. When among donkeys a donkey brays, I don't suppose anyone notices the change. What was required of one was to show off his opulence and behave with superiority. This was the least difficult with dull diplomatic cadres that most countries sent out. There were a few exceptions like Sir Broadguage Bloomingfield, or the Kharosan or Samian Ambassador, I daresay, recalling CDA's appraisal of the men, for they were required to sell ideas and governments that controlled the world, as he said. One had only to look a giant among

pigmies, a one-eyed peeping torn among self- satisfied civil servants blind in both eyes. Even then, if one shut the only seeing eye it did not matter. No one marked his steps, and there was no one to see. Most governments, and those of newly founded countries specially, had no stakes in world politics. Why did they send out experts like CDA, I could not understand, for the government had no use for scholarly dispatches or top secret information that was sent out. They had no occasion to act on them, nor strings to pull, as GHQ did from behind the scene in battle. The reports one sent were sat over by a bottom heavy with the load he carried on his head. Yet, somehow, I felt different from the common run of two-penny envoys. Not for nothing had I voyaged through the uncharted seas of lunacy, and the strategy of successful retreats. I wanted to secure my place in history, both for my own sake and my progeny. I did not wish to remain unbeknown in this world of blind alleys.

Lunacy and War had their common points. The fantasies of the asylum had found their prize in the enemy's camps and rich cities I had looted to my fill. Army life and Diplomacy also had similarities. If they picked each other's lice in the barracks, they picked each other's secrets in diplomatic life. Perhaps the same radio-active principle of the Kharosan Ambassador worked behind them both. The contact between the conscious and subconscious of my brain seemed to have been lost. Ever since the Commerce Minister's banquet my mind was roving in a fantasmagoria. Whenever the moon came peeping through the window, my heart stirred, and I had a strange sensation of elation and poetry, and I wanted to lisp in numbers and find Paradise the dullest place to live in. But this was Paradise, and I did not find it dull. Surely, the Scandalasian Charge d'Affaires' wife was wrong. Poets were the silliest people on earth. Could I not win her without the poetry? If only I could establish the radio-active relation between the compartments of the brain! Was it this the Kharosan Ambassador was hinting at? If so, how more subtle than the hintings of Sir Broadguage Bloomingfield, whose import I could now discern.

'If one could master this secret,' CDA had commented on the Kharosan theory, 'there would be no fear of reality, no hesitation in plunging into unforgetable bliss. It was only the awareness of that which existed outside of one which held him back from doing what he most desired. There was poetry in madness,' he had said, 'a prismic glow that lighted up the empires of the soul.' It seemed he was echoing my own thoughts. But the way he talked I could see the poppy of desire aglow in the sunshine of my being. I could see its red

incarnadine the whole gamut of experience. The black circle round the dot in the centre of the flower intensified the point of the pod which on maturing could fill the limitless earth and all it contained with the most magical dreams.

I put this question in confidence to Toon-toon. His party I had attended and found very dull but for some jaded women he had collected from nowhere, in whose midst he had put me with a gesture suggesting: Which one? That evening it so happened I was just not responsive, or the presence of his junior friends had put me off, perhaps. On another occasion he had asked me to a quiet dinner with two dames he had picked up in the Dragon Boat District, perhaps victims of Independence or rocketing prices or in search of moonshine. We had remained locked up in the arms of love and sleep until the crestfallen stars had disappeared in a dawndabbed sky, and my dream of profligacy was disturbed by the nightmare of my first and former wife kicking me, and hard, and I had crawled under the bed for failing to respond to her call. But I had soon felt relieved by the thought of my second paramour who had called me a rancid goat and fled...

'Poetry,' said Toon-toon, 'is merely an opiate the unworthy require to buckle up their courage. We did not need it, General, did we? in the face of danger and death. You remember the babe in the wood, after the Battle of Frogs, who came begging for shelter and food? Did we read poetry to win her for our necessity? As for the lady you mention, she is an overripe fruit. It will fall at a mere touch of the hand. She is frustrated, being only a Second Secretary's wife. War, and the glamour of Embassy, can as effectively replace the poetry to fire the furnace that melts all resistance even though hard as steel. But why should you waste your energies? We shall get easier beauties for no effort, as we used to do.... '

No. That did not solve my problem. Toon-toon had not changed or moved out of the trenches. He was still stalking among the dying, the wounded and the dead. A change had come upon me. The air of Ratisan had perhaps done the trick. Was it the stimulus of power and plenty that lay scattered at my feet? Or was my mind really becoming radio-active with the change of service and the scene? 'No man is an indefinite fool if he has the background and the necessary ascending and retroactive power of ambition,' CDA had once said. The contact with diplomacy had released that force in me perhaps. Already I was thinking in terms of the experienced and well-grounded in the art of mounting the saddle. Not only could I argue like CDA, I could also read the hidden nuances in the conversation of the most astute. I remembered a conversation during which someone had said—or was it CDA?—that 'the mind of man was like Pandora's

box. It required only the presence of a Prometheus to open the lid.' Who was that Prometheus in my case? I could not tell. Was it CDA, or Diplomacy, or the Scandalasian Second Secretary's wife? Perhaps all three in one. Primarily it was myself and no one else. I was both my own Pandora and Prometheus, nursing the dormant powers of nepenthe in the hot-house of my brain, freed suddenly of the restricting walls of the box by untramelled leisure and deep desire, dream-active and interference free.

The lid seemed opening, however, for an invitation came from the Charge d'Affaires of Scandalasia. It was followed up by a personal telephone call from the man himself urging me to come. I could recognise the wish of his wife behind his voice....

And there, surrounded by diplomats, I could see her standing in a flowing turquoise gown tinged with joy, with a dash of red on the breast from the watermelon tint of Sorayya the queen of roses, her brown hair parted in the middle, and laughing pearls around her neck, and diamonds scintillating in her ears, rouged and bejewelled, so different from the others, even old ones almost decrepit, in cubes and culottes, saris and sarongs, bikinis and fish-nets, pyjamas and winding sheets, or bouffant skirts like little girls' long before they put on their wedding gowns and take them off to become domesticated. I could see the white mushroom of her husband's head showing above the weedy hair, dagoba coiffeurs and crows' nest chignon of the milling crowd, the Diplomatic Corps of Micea and their families, a motley company full of colour yet devoid of it, lilting and sober, dull faces dead. The mirrors reflected my own pale face, but she trimmed her way through and proferred her hand, the fingers so elegant with rubies and wild as eglantine to the lips.

'Monsieur l'Ambassadeur. How nice.'

'My compliments, Madame....'

'Oh, for the wings of a dove.'

'I wish I were out of this hole. It has a *je ne sais quoi* feeling.'

'There you are, Madame Carbonet, *cherie.* Where have you been? *En vacancel* How nice for you.'

'And the bracelet, a lover's knot. I had forgotten.'

'Our previous cook was wonderful. But ever since the incident in the Hotel des

Gallants de Loisir in which his poor wife was involved, he had lost all interest. Oh dear, what *cochemar!'*

'Some men are like that you know, dear.'

'Like a blunderbuss, blustering his way through.'

'Ah, the Suck well daughter. How like a peach!'

'Even after the tragedy. Most young men are after her. Our Attache too.'

'There you are, Madame.'

'Oh, my frayed nerves. I am all on edge.'

'Of course she is frightened. Any maid would be of anything pale in the night pressing ....'

'What?'

'Their faces against the window panes.'

'And the cook had to go. He could not leave the poor thing alone.'

'Mind your step.'

They had reached the music room door. Through the brilliance of gilt-edged mirror frames and the chandeliers and candle-globes hanging downwards like incandescent pencils, the pink silk carpet and elaborately carved and gilded chairs upholstered in rich green brocatelle, and a piano reflecting the faces and the shoes, the jostling company of cherubs and goblins danced its way through on restless feet.

'I'd love to sit with my leg entwined around this Louis XIV.'

'And feel like de Maintenon,' she said as she speared a shrimp and laughed. 'Oh, what a phantasy!'...

Spilling over into the Coffee Room and, along covered verandahs, the lounge, the crowds guzzled delicacies, exchanged indelicate gossip and twirled the glasses in their hands. Through the open windows one could see the sea of faces, pale, flushed and dark, intent on meaningless chatter and diplomatic drinks fresh on *bond de franchise,* framed as it were in a nightmare of conversation.

'That brooch, Anne darling. Surely a Castellani.'

'Desire Fremont. The man I bought it from said it came from Antioch. I don't

believe him, dear.'

'I tell you what, in confidence, the little junk market is a treasure trove of some long forgotten king.'

'My brother is in the Palace Guards.'

'I had almost married a soldier.'

'Why didn't you?'

'Oh, he ate my head off with his talk of bullets and bayonets.'

'But no one can afford a war.'

'The President is only shamming.'

'So that he gets the best of both the worlds, eat his cake and have it too.'

'I tried all the telephones. It was quite impossible.'

'Why do they have us here then? Why not ask us to pack up and go?'

'Only the Ambassador won't listen.'

'But the rats. And they thrive.'

'Family planning.'

'They should invite the Arabs to come with their falcons to hunt them for their aphrodisiac quality as they do the bustards in Pakistan.'

'I would sooner mow them down....'

They were talking my own language, or had I myself made the last remark? They had trailed me from room to room, or I had followed their little talk wherever they had gone. They stuck together in bunches with new ones joining, or someone moving out to join a new coterie. I too whirled and walked with them, until suddenly the junk shop began to haunt me, and the hotel maid too. I wished I could get a nice gem. It would look so pretty on her finger. I must look for it and find one.

I found myself standing by a window. A big brown moon came out suddenly, hesitating over the undulating line of the untrained trees, whether to come in or pass by overhead into the night. She came and stood by me. Suddenly I realised most of the guests had gone. The room we stood in overlooked the main lawn, and was almost empty, and the silence seemed like the soughing of the breeze. A

few still stood near the door, lingering to exchange the last gossip; and the Scandalasian Charge d'Affaires was busy talking to an animated group on the verandah steps leading to the gate.

'I thought you disliked poetry,' she said in a teasing tone.

'Indeed I do. I simply can't make head or tail of it, like tadpoles. But the moon. The moon held me back. We were both hesitating.'

'To ask for a drink? I find your hands are empty.'

'No. To say goodbye. It always reminds me ....'

Of what did it remind me? I could not really tell.

'Of what?' she asked with interested curiosity.

Suddenly it sprang to mind, out of the darkness, a cascade of light, leaping out of the hanging moon now turning bright, real, undying, giving me the power of words and vision:

'A golden haired lion '

She must have been surprised or frightened. She gave out a goat-like laugh, as though unbelieving. With a shiver I came to. The dark spot vanished.

'You don't believe it?' I said. 'I will tell you. We were entrenched in the jungle. The night was pitch. The enemy was all around us. Every shrub, every hole, concealed danger. They had been firing sporadically the whole evening to find our exact location. Behind us was a swamp, and I had given strict orders to hold on to the trench we had occupied on retreating, until the morning, and give no clue of our hide-out. There was a sudden burst of shots in quick succession, and the ensuing silence was terrifying. We had to keep our heads ducked for fear of stray bullets. Tired of waiting, I popped my head and looked. There was the bright round moon lurking behind a bare thorn. It was so big. I was amazed. The more so as exactly where the moon was, a golden haired lion was staring at me. I hauled my mauser and fired ....' She was listening intently, a glow in her eyes.

'And then?'

'We were lost.'

'It must have been terrible!'

She was visibly moved, and looked at me with sympathy.

'Let's go into the garden,' she said. 'I would like to look at the moon.'

The last guests were leaving, and the Charge d'Affaires was standing at the gate still joking and laughing. The rooms were a wreck of glasses piled on tables and window-sills, bare and empty. The moonlight covered the grass and tree tops with a thin mantle.

Under a juniper tree I flung my arms around her gently. She did not seem to mind, and soon yielded to my touch. As Toon-toon had said it was all so easy. Poetry was much ado about nothing....

Part Two

RODENT

My Lord, Jesus Christ, true God, and was this, then, the fashion of thy semblance?

—Jorge Louis Borges

10

The Department of Protocol had done nothing about my house, the need for which I now felt more urgently than ever. I had no freedom of movement, and inviting friends was not free from risk, especially since my Personal Assistant told me he had been given a lift by Col Bullshot to the Office in his car. I questioned the fellow in detail about the Colonel, but he obviously had not told him anything significant. Nonetheless, Bullshot was not only Military Attache, but I suspected him of belonging to the SSO. Had we not been betrayed to the enemy by a docile subaltern during a march through an evacuated front? Moreover, the atmosphere since the incident of the maid had become polluted. Every time I passed her door the memory of her bone-thin ankles and hollow breasts persecuted me.

Why did a country agree to have an envoy of another when it could not provide him the basic comforts of life? I represented my Government and was the sole representative of the President. I was, in fact, the Government of Bachusan in the Ratisanian capital. But I did not even have a residence where I could

fly my flag alone and be immune from the laws and restrictions of the country of my accre-ditation.

I had sent notes to Protocol about my accomodation which were left unacknowledged. I sent CDA himself, and they replied they were still looking for one. After the Scandalasian reception I became impatient and saw the Chief of Protocol myself, and threatened him with reciprocal action against the Ratisanian envoy in my country. I wrote even to our own Chief of Protocol, and received a reply that my difficulties had been impressed upon the Ratisanian Ambassador, and that he had given pressure on space in Micea as the excuse. When I contacted the Ratisanian authorities again they yielded to the extent of promising that if I could find a house they would requisition it for me. That was as good as impossible, for our resources were meagre. But the Chancellor said he had friends among Ratisanians and would ask them to help.

I was worried on another score. I had received no reply to my telegram asking for the price of the cats and the number we could supply. The deal did not seem to have any importance for the Government, whereas it meant everything to me. Having opened the negotiations, I had come to have a stake in the deal. My prestige was involved, as that of the Government itself, on whose behalf I stood com- mited for an answer and to go ahead. It was fortunate the Ratisanians did not remind us or call another meeting. They were taken up with the political crisis, perhaps, which was just as well.

I had been sent to Micea and forgottem I felt like a General posted to the Front with no orders from the High Command as to what I should do. In the Army I had more power, of course. I could forge ahead or retreat. The obliteration of my existence did not affect the troops whose lives and fortunes were in my hands. I could lead them into the hell of battle or the limbo of an enemy camp. I could not take similar action as Ambassador. I could not move a step without instructions. With telegraphic communication an Ambassador's position had been reduced to that of a messenger with no brains. Where was diplomacy when I had no authority to do things which were enitrely in the interests of the Government? A clerk could act on instructions. The only initiative I was allowed as Ambassador was to be diplomatic without any occasion for diplomatic dealings, and to invent lies to save face.

CDA held different views. He said it was far more difficult to be diplomatic about nothing than about something. For, he maintained, the trial of diplomacy

lay in keeping things to oneself and in avoiding embarrassments, if not actually turning them to one's advantage. Anyone could assume silence or ignorance about secrets, but it was harder to assume knowledge and wisdom in the face of something non-existent, he argued. The art and enjoyment of diplomacy, in his view, consisted in being confident and giving with humility the impression of strength and pride, the capacity to ward off any blow with a graceful smile, a repartee, and to hide one's ignorance behind disarming nonsense, gaining time by putting the burden of conversation on the other. That is why, I suddenly felt, he had talked the way he had done during the negotiations. His performance was impressive though I was inwardly unhappy and had punished him with the task of checking the accounts of the Embassy personally as he had been declared Head of the Chancery by the Foreign Office, thus creating another Head to batter against mine as Head of Mission. So, the mistake in accounting, which the Accountant said persisted, was CDA's responsibility, and he had to get his head broken, for which it was not my business to act as a cushion or supply the bandages. I had my own worries, and gave him additional duties to make sure he did not spy on my movements as I went with my Scandalasian to the Rodent Roundelay or the Gilded Rat, a night club which they called an inn.

Here I entertained her in semi-darkness the first evening we were out alone, her husband having been invited to a stag party. We sat in a box, well-concealed behind ferns and rubber plants and the foliage of scented night-flowering shrubs, a hidden haven of delight, sipping champagne, and listening to syncopated music while Ratisanians danced the shake and twist. I did not react to the birch-branch ankles and bulging shins of their females. Her own legs were beautiful. I was not agitated by their breast-flaps any more. Their movements were uncouth, but the furtive eyes of my companion possessed the softness of the moon. Watching their giddy gyrations she remarked:

'Their own dancing is so graceful. It's a pity they have taken to this licentious form of excitement.'

'It's the sex age. That is why.'

'But sex has always been there. Hasn't it? Did people express their desire the less, or feel the lack of emotion?'

'Keeping pace with the times. Everyone is not a Hitler to keep the frenzy of blood in the blood,'I repeated a phrase I had heard. 'War has released their inhibitions. If you had seen the orgy of death you would have felt like this

yourself.'

'To me war and killing are both unreal. I wish I could go back to the past, far away in time, when human beings were human, and life was full of peace; I wish these people did not lose their own ways in imitating what is out of tune with their nature and is in line only with the hurry and tempo of a mad world, the uncontrolled freedom of countries of mixed racial instincts. Europe is gentler. We have not yet forgotten there the art of living.'

'When Europe becomes underdeveloped it will also do. The developing countries have no alternative. The standards they see are American; the models they follow are American too. After all, America leads the world. She has the power and the money to force her stamp on every face.'

'I'm afraid, I have no sympathy witli hybrids. Why can't we preserve natural beauty?'

'But war has set the pattern. Even England has succumbed to it...'

With a wild cry a singer jumped up to the microphone gesticulating.

> Honey, honey, hi!

he shouted, as though it were a battle cry:

> I kiss you on the buttocks
> You kiss me on the thigh.
> O honey, honey, hi!

And the band seemed to run away with the music in a doomsday noise of jarring sound. Even I, so weather-worn and seasoned in battle, could not appreciate the song.

'There. That's what I mean,' she said. 'It does not fit the background. Ratisanians' own music is so beautiful. I have heard and enjoyed it even without being initiated into its symbolism. The modulation of voice and the purity of tone is exquisite even though intricate, result of centuries of practice and intimate knowledge of breath control. You must listen to it. I shall take you to my Ratisanian friend one day...'

The image of her purity I had built up unconsciously in my mind was disturbed at the thought that she could become friendly with natives. Yet I felt jealous of that unknown person with whom she was intimate, in whose company

she must have spent hours of happiness.

The band was now playing an old world tune for a change. I could not resist the temptation, and said rising for a dance: 'May I?'

There was a lull in the political movement. Some more arrests were made; and the application of the President of the Unprivileged People's Party for release under the habeas corpus was rejected by the Judge Superior as the crime was against the Constitution. The Secretary-General of the Pious Persons' League was reported to have suffered an attack of madness in jail, and his relatives were pleading for his removal to a mental hospital. I knew what that meant, though it was reported by the anti-religious press that he had really had a fit of religious frenzy, and was unsympathetic to the demand for mercy on the ground that multiplication of saints was detrimental to the growth of rational attitudes and would only add to the opiate effect of religion and respect for rats under which the country already staggered. It also called for a total dessication of the outward symbol of the disease so that the people were rid of inflated dreams induced by fake mysticism, and of threatened national destruction by loss of food grain and expensive Samian aid and consequent indebtedness. It quoted the example of China which, in one sweeping movement, had finished off the population of dogs and was the only country outside of USA and the Soviet Union to be self-sufficient, with no national or international debts to pay. It advocated immediate establishment of friendly relations with People's China and seeking her help. ...

The Government was obviously giving the political com-mentators a long rope; but Kharosan diplomacy was said to be active. Samia seemed to be watching the situation. The Samian Ambassador must have been working on something secret, for he was absent from the Indian National Day reception along with his nose-dripping Counsellor; and his Mission was represented by a First Secretary and the Military Attache who stood alone the whole evening except for half an hour when he was engaged in conversation with Sir Broadguage Bloomingfield, and briefly with the Ambassador of Serpentinia.

It eventually transpired that the Samian Ambassador had gone on a hush-hush mission to the interior, and rumours of all sorts were rife. Some ascribed his visit to investigation of the extent of damage to the crops before determining the quantity of aid. Some said that he wanted to make sure that rats and not human smugglers were responsible for the shortage of food grain. Some even put it down to the selection of sites for missile bases.

These speculations came to an end when a Samian news agency report summarised the reasons for the ineffectiveness of pesticide sent to Ratisan. It said that there was nothing wrong with the chemicals supplied, and put the blame rankly on the rats which refused to take it in any form. It then dwelt on methods of rodent control and said the rats generally found in the area were the smaller black and the stronger brown or Norwegian varieties, the former having migrated to Europe from South Asia in the thirteenth century, and the latter from Central Asia to England about 1730, thence to America from where their migratory history got mixed up in waves and counterwaves of movement, but Asia remained the region of original sin. They were extremely cunning, the report went on, reacting strongly to any change of food and environment, and yet possessing a propensity to adaptation of climate and scene. The white rats, the report informed, were different from the coloured ones in psychology, the olfactory sense and vibrissae being of greater importance in them than sight. The report, however, suggested caution in arguing from the white to the brown variety. It mentioned experiments that were carried out in Colonies with baits and poisons, various food grains and rice being used and tested. Wheat, maize; lentils, barley and millet were preferred by the rats. The greatest success, according to the report, was achieved with soaked wheat and soaked crushed barley and maize with 5% of zinc phosphide or arsenic as poison. But, experiments in fields and open areas were more difficult, as rats had the run of wide spaces and God's own earth. In farms they were killed by digging out the holes and releasing trained dogs, or by baiting and trapping them in farm houses, corn-ricks, barns and stacks of hay. In the countryside, the report continued, success of rat control depended on mobility of the baiters in poisoning holes and selected sites, but where the population was not sympathetic the experiments failed. In a country like Rati- san, the report concluded, where farmers and peasants were averse to rat killing for religious or humanitarian reasons, and because their lentils and millet got a low price anyway, rat control was a problem. It advocated drought and famine as the only solution for starving the rats out.

Reactions to the report started coming within a few days of its appearance, when the local press singled out the colour question for attack, accusing the Samians of putting all the blame on the brown and black species. *The Hot Ball* went to the extent of dragging in America and saying that Samia wanted to use the same methods of human extermination in Ratisan which America had employed in Vietnam. Added to this, the editorial said, was the conspiracy of creating artificial famine so that those who escaped poisoning died of hunger like

the rats.

The Pious Persons' Monitor accused Samia of having poisoned food grain to be mixed with untreated quantities, thus causing ailments of the alimentary canal and food poisoning, which had become common since rat control started under Samian supervision.

The Medical Practitioner came out with a new angle on piles which, it said, were caused by the formation of gases in the stomach by the minute quantities of zinc sulphide, barium carbonate, or red quill, in bread flour. The wind, it explained, had a tendency to force an exit through the anus, thus causing the haemorrhoids to swell and become enlarged with subsequent flow of blood.

What struck me most personally was the reported use of dogs for killing rats. Cats would, of course, be far more effective; and I could see them running after the rats, black or brown or white, stunning them with their paws, shaking and gnawing them, an army chasing an army, mauling and killing over stubble and down furrows of ploughed up fields, farms and meadows for miles and miles. I was so fascinated by the sight that I straightaway dictated a telegram to the Foreign Secretary by name requesting a reply to mine about the deal which was long overdue.

A news item announced that the Samian Ambassador had paid the Foreign Office a visit. I wondered why, and learnt from Toon-toon the same evening that he had gone to protest against the press campaign which had intensified its attacks against his country. But the Burmese Ambassador's information was that his visit was connected with Kharosan diplomacy which was instigating the dissident parties and even preparing their programmes and backing them with monetary help. He based his contention on the fact that the Samian Ambassador was accompanied by his Military Attache. He even said that Samia was threatening to withdraw all aid if no curbs were placed on Kharosan activities. Sir Broadguage Bloomingfield being present I asked him in a tete-a-tete what he thought of the visit.

'Routine consultations, if you ask me,' he replied indiffer-ently.

But Toon-toon was right, for the Home Minister issued a statement denouncing the disruptionists in a sharp warning, saying that if their provocative activities were not stopped the Government would take stronger measures to root out hatred and jealousy. It was a constitutional government of the people, he said, which could not tolerate the subversive activities of a small group which

wanted to ruin the peace and happiness of the nation by creating confusion and panic. As for the economic situation, he asserted, the Government had decided to maintain the tempo of development, and could control the rats without Chinese help that had been offered to catch the rodents live but which was in no way important or necessary, and should never be mentioned again. The rats would be crushed, he announced, in no time, and the Government's efforts on that front would soon become evident. He pleaded for full confidence in the President under whose inspiring leadership, he emphasised, the country had made unprecedented progress and achieved stability. He reminded the nation that since the rediscovery and glorification by the President of the real father and hero of Ratisan, Tyrus the Great of the hoary past, the country had made rapid strides towards modernization, emancipation of women and eradication of superstition, outmoded traditions, religious fanaticism and medieval ways of life.

Before the dust had settled on this statement, news started pouring in that the rats were migrating. Speculation was rife that poison gas had been used to drive them out of their holes. There could be no other reason for sudden panic among them. The newspapers sent their correspondents to report eye-witness accounts of the exodus. When they reached the area of migration, however, they were stopped from proceeding further by local authorities. They reported back to their editors who went to the Ministry of Home Affairs, but getting no satisfactory reply called on the Minister Kim- / self who was, however, not available. They learnt that he was busy with a high-powered delegation which had suddenly arrived from neighbouring Sacerdotia situated immediately to the east of Ratisan on the other side of which lay the Bay of Sins. Sacerdotia was originally part of Serpentinia but had separated from it on the basis of revulsion its population felt for the colour of Serpentinians' skin. This had caused a great deal of bitterness and bloodshed between the two.

It came to light that the rats were migrating towards Sacerdotia which took it as a deliberate move to snatch away more territory from it by driving the rats inside its borders, thus creating a law and order situation for its Government. As the rats had constantly been crossing over to Sacerdotia and destroying the crops, relations between the two countries had reached a breaking point, and both Samia and Kharosa had brought pressure to bear on them to settle their dispute by peaceful means. But emotions had been worked up by leaders of both sides wanting to consolidate their positions, and neither side was willing to come to terms.

Since rat-control had started after the establishment of the Presidency, rats had been seeking shelter in Sacerdotia where life was comparatively free of persecution and shortage of food. This created an agrarian problem in that country as it was faced with the crisis of feeding additional mouths. Added to this was the economic depression as the balance of trade, dependent on the export of food grain, was upset. Sacerdotia declared a state of emergency, and drove as many rats back into Ratisan as was possible, but Ratisan refused to take them in, alleging that they were Sacerdotians. The rats who had come back were not acceptable to the country of their domicile. The religious organisations favoured their staying on undisturbed, but the President administered a warning saying that there was no place for refugees in Ratisan other than the sea. Things came to such a pass that the armies of the two countries were arrayed across the frontiers. Kharosan diplomacy, aided by Samian pressure, saved the situation, and the rats were allowed to stay.

Now when the exodus started, Sacerdotia was naturally perturbed and appealed to the UN Commission for the Regularisation of Ratio-Sacerdotian Frontier which had been set up in a bid to settle their dispute. The Commission advised avoidance of discord if they at all desired help from them. Thus, Sacerdotia sent a delegation in a bid to persuade Ratisan to put a halt to the migration at once, instead of making matters worse.

These developments diverted the attention of the press from internal affairs to a fear of war with Sacerdotia which, the newspapers began to harp afresh, was an enemy, and played up the large economic and military aid she was receiving both from Samia and Kharosa which could be used against Ratisan. Under cover of this they attacked Samia on the ground that she was playing a double game, and that nothing better could be expected from her. 'We must turn to Kharosa for military aid,' advocated *The Hot Bally* and the organ of the Unprivileged People's Party published a strong plea for an immediate rapprochement with China which had no stake in international intrigue in the area. In a snap action the Government arrested its editor and confiscated its printing machinery. After this confusion ensued, and no one seemed to know what was happening. I learnt by chance that some diplomatic mis-sions were thinking of sending observers to the rat front. When Toon-toon told me that he was going to see the exodus, I decided to visit the area and see for myself what was happening. Moroever, Toon-toon could be of great help during the trip.

We were stopped by local authorities from entering the eastern-most province

of Ratisan, but I flung my Carte d'Identite into their faces, and protested so loudly at their interference with my privileges as a diplomat that they were immediately subdued and did not know what to do in such a situation. So, we continued our journey undisturbed. When we reached the great area of the rats we did not find much activity, unfortunately. Either the rats had crossed over or had been turned back. We did, however, see an endless variety of rodents like marmots, priarie dogs, ground hogs, gophers, hamsters and voles which, the Bambian interpreter said, belonged to different parts of the world but were native to Ratisan. There were many others too, the British and Norwegian rats, the jumping mice of China and USA, the dormice of Russia, the bamboo rats of India, and the jerboas of the desert regions of Pakistan. I never knew there were rats of so many varieties. No wonder the grain crops had been undone so wantonly. Toon-toon went in ecstasy over quite a few and wanted to put them in his pocket. Only, they were too quick and elusive, and defied our attempts to get close to them. But looking at some of them I began to fear for my cats, and was assailed with doubts if they would be able to kill them.

My astonishment knew no bounds when we were taken by local guides to the eastern-most point of the country which touched the sea where, they said, the exodus could still be seen. It was the very last wave of desperate souls, it seemed. For I was amazed to see hundreds and thousands of brown rats which, the Interpreter said, were Norwegian of Ratus Norwegicus, running for their lives, one after another pell mell, each outracing the other, pushing, jostling, jumping over the backs of their companions, biting, stumbling, crawling, climbing, falling and rising, but hurrying on, as though driven by the tail-twisting devil himself, towards the promised land from ages-long exile and nostalgia for kissing the soil of their mother-earth original, chasing blindly the vision and the dream of salvation that lay, so it seemed, in the Bay of Sins, and beyond, in some lost Atlantis their home from which they had come in a long forgotten past, egged on by a force invisible, following the unheard lute of an alluring Piper, the maker of melodies full of unremembered memories. The expression of their eyes was of ecstatic frenzy, of rapture born of a knowledge of inner truth, the intenser light within the higher dream. No noise distracted them from their course, no obstacle was insurmountable. They devoured rich ripe crops that came their way, swam across pools and puddles and streams, and rushed on towards their unknown goal. Many fell into wells and ditches, but no one stopped to help or retrieve them. Many jumped over steep banks, but rose to continue their hallucinatory march. There were both young and old among them, and male and female of all

ages and in all conditions.

'Look at that bitch,' shouted Toon-toon. 'She is in the throes of birth, the shame!' Or, 'Look at that wise old fool, General. How it sits and watches unconcerned, like some village idiot, the silly cavalcade.'

'Stampede,' I corrected him.

'Fleeing the onslaught of the enemy, the cowards!' he said. 'Did not we do the same in the great action of Routs?'

'Memorable,' I commented. 'I wish I could have crushed them like the rats under the wheels of my jeep. But then, we were on the run, and the Japs had advantage. These rats are free. Look,' I shouted as we suddenly descended a slope and came in full view of the Bay of Sins.

An awe-inspiring sight met my gaze. The whole earth from the foreground to the farthest extent of the shore was black with pouring rats tumbling and limping in a mad rush of schizophrenics towards the unbarred gate of the mad house we call the earth, and beyond into the freedom of the sea and Bay of Sins, each vying with the other to reach the waters and embrace the rising waves in a bid to find Nirvan. The very surf was covered with their bodies from the crest to the trough of the waves as the very earth had been.

'The Battle of Sharks,' said Toon-toon in a sad tone of defeat.

Alas, how true. It was the greatest scene I have witnessed in war or peace—collective suicide on a massive scale; paling into insignificance the American cultist groups' periodic attempts at doing the same....

And I wondered about the cats and my deal. What was left for me to negotiate after this self-immolating sight? My hopes were drowned with the rats. I could never imagine in my wildest dreams that I was building castles on froth and foam. Never could I believe that a population of millions could run into the arms of death for life's salvation and peace! I felt my whole experience of war changing and reversed. Alas, for this life, a mad world's empty dream!

But then, as we turned our backs and retraced our way, the landscape was peaceful and serene. The rats romped the fields, and mice and rodents nibbled at the corn and crops and fallen grain as though nothing had happened, and all that I had seen with my own eyes was a nightmare, a figment of my brain. As we moved farther away from the border and the sea, and came upon fields and barns

and granaries, it seemed the number of rats had in no way decreased. In fact, the nearer we drew to Micea, the greater seemed the population of rats. No nuclear holocaust could then destroy the whole of the human race. I felt relieved. My deal and the cats had been saved!

12

I found a reply to my queries awaiting me. The cypher message said among other things: 'Cats are no commodity worth trading in. Be careful what you negotiate. For your information, Samia is interested in the preservation of rats in your area of accreditation, and is not supporting Rati- san's application to UN for help in their extermination. This is strictly top secret. You have made our position embarrassing by committing the President to a supply of cats without our permission. Your action has been viewed with disfavour. Since you have been a ratter we have persuaded the Government to agree to export cats to save the prestige of the President. But do not forget they will have to be caught. The Ministry of Natural Resources who were contacted said it would cost about ten dollars a piece to do so. Cages and freight would be extra. If they still want them we shall obtain clearance from the Ministries of Health and Commerce. My own advice is steer clear of rats, or you will be called a tool.'

I felt as though I had been given a douche. But I did not feel depressed as permission had been given to finalise the deal. Nonetheless, I could not understand what the Foreign Secretary meant by calling me a 'tool'. So, I sent for CDA, and asked him if he had deciphered the message correctly. He looked at the telegram and said that he had put it down exactly as it was in the original. The letter was f and not t.

'Then why is it not so here?'

'Must be a typing error.'

'Who typed it?'

'Your Personal Assistant.'

'Call him. Or wait. I shall find out myself. You can go.'

I walked into the PA's room. He was a tall, lean person, black as sin, with trimmed, grisly moustaches. He wore a badly tailored, shabby coat and a necktie the colour of gelatine. He had some photographs spread out before him and was

staring at Gina Lolobrigida. This annoyed me at once, as it brought back the memory of a friend whose sweetheart she had been.

'You are given a fat foreign allowance and free furnished accomodation to dress like a scarecrow and look at dirty pictures?'

The chap was frightened and doubled up sheepishly, which angered me more.

'And you make typing errors?' I fired the ten-pounder at him.

'When, Sir?'

'You ask me when? And you call me "Sir" instead of Excellency? You will explain that later. Just now, you tell me what was the word here, in this cypher message.'

He looked at it and was lost in thought.

'Fool,' was all he said.

I caught the fellow by his tie and dragged him through the Office for everyone to see, to the First Secretary's room who was flabbergasted to see me pull the typist like a sacrificial goat.

'This is the kind of staff you have employed! Charge-sheet him at once.'

'What has happened now?' he asked with surprise.

'The nit-wit does not even know how to type.'

'Why did you do it?' CDA asked the typist rather gently.

He looked crestfallen as before a confessing priest, then mumbled:

'How could I call His Excellency a "fool"?'

CDA smiled faintly; and I came back fuming to my room having taught the jackanapes a lesson.

The telephone was buzzing. I picked up the receiver. It was the Foreign Office. The Director of Intercontinental Affairs was summoning me to the Ministry.

'When?' I asked.

'This evening at seven.'

'But I have to go to the Kharosan Army Day reception.'

'As you please, Excellency,' and the line was cut.

I was looking forward to meeting my Scandalasian in the evening, and swore. Why must they call an Ambassador Extraordinary, and at such an unearthly hour! Could this not wait till morning? I was still in a grey mood when the Chancellor came in looking sheepish and cunning in the same breath. He did not seem to have any work in particular. Finding me out of humour he was about to retreat when I asked:

'Yes. What is it you want?'

'Excuse me, HE,' he said. 'You had asked me to keep my ears open. At the Serpentinian Chancellor's dinner last night ....'

'But I had given orders that no one was to accept any invitation to the Serpentinian Embassy without my permission.'

'I did not go to the Embassy, Your Excellency. It was the Chancellor.'

'Even so. It was contravention of my orders. Call CDA.'

'He has gone out, Sir.'

'But he was here a little while ago.'

'The Ministry of Commerce had telephoned for him.'

'How could he go without telling me? This is a wonderful place! The Chancellor does not care for my orders. The First Secretary goes out at will. And the Ambassador does not exist! In future no one will go out without first telling me. Not even to the lavatory. Understand?'

The poor chap got a tummy ache, and held his belly as he bowed, and did not raise his head until I said:

'You were reporting something to me.'

'You will pardon me, HE—you will get angry.'

'Go on!' I commanded.

The man relaxed. His aquiline nose shook like a hornbill's, and his eyes glowed like a fox's in the night. He took a step forward and, craning his neck, said in a whisper almost inaudible:

'They were talking about this cat business. I don't know what it was all about, but Your Excellency's name was mentioned.'

'What did they say about me?'

'I don't know what they meant, but I thought they said something about your being the son of a gun. I gathered their Ambassador thinks you one.'

'The worm! I shall teach him a lesson all right. You can go.' As he was disappearing I called him back and added: 'That order about going to the Serpentinian Embassy does not apply to you. Bring me more information.'

Because of the Foreign Office appointment I was three quarters of an hour late for the Kharosan reception. The Director of Intercontinental Affairs had only a *note verbale* to give, mentioning the exaggerated press reports and asking the Foreign Missions not to be perturbed by the political situation in the country. The Government of Ratisan was desirous of reassuring its friends, the Note continued, that strong measures were being taken to control the rats and the refugee problem, and considered it necessary to warn all Heads of Missions, in their own interests, to avoid going to the rat areas, or sending their officers whether diplomatic or local.

There was nothing in the Note which was of such importance as to necessitate disturbing an Ambassador himself, and could just as well have been sent by messenger or handed over to the First Secretary or any other member of the Mission. There was in it, however, a concealed hint of disapproval about my recent visit to the border. But then, the Government was itself inefficient and had neither told us in advance that it was forbidden to go to the eastern areas, nor that secret measures were being taken against the rats, local or refugee. The Note confirmed my suspicion that the allegation of the use of the poison gas was substantial. How could the rats have been driven otherwise in large numbers? And yet it was an exodus. The rats were going east as though possessed, and marching blindly into the sea as if urged by a driving force which, having been released, could neither be arrested nor withdrawn. Surely, I thought, the Samians had used a secret weapon of great destructive power, the Hiroshima atom bomb or the compelling radioactive waves they possessed. This was a warning, it seemed, to the world that if they did not fall on their knees before Samia's will and accept her undeclared suzerainty over their bodies and brains, she would crush them without violence like the rats, and prove to the populations of other as yet unconquered stars her power and might, the failure of whose recognition would lead to a similar death of the whole wide universe as though it had committed sympathetic suicide. Our efforts during the War were as nothing in

the face of this omnipotent secret. It was more dynamic than the hallucinations of all the schizophrenics of the world, the intuitive upsurge of evil displayed by racial hatred of the whites for the black, the instinct for sin and crime inherent in people of mixed origins whose criminal tendencies became more potent the more powerful they became, and which made them behave like cowards bullying the helpless and the weak. The evil CDA had spoken of, I was now con-vinced, did triumph in the end. The tradition of anti-culture itself, forces of anti-civilisation greater than those of civilisation, of anti-life rooted in life. What the Greeks, the Turks, Indians and the Chinese had built over the centuries, Russia and America were now destroying, as the glories of Atlantis had been destroyed by Nature, though part of its achievement and thought had been saved, CDA believed, by the Aryans who, surely, had escaped the lava and the engulfment, for they could not have come from any other region, and hardly from Central Asia which produced only hordes of barbarians. There was much in common, he asserted, between the Greek and Hindu mythologies whose origins seemed to be the same, even though both may have borrowed from ancient Egypt their fertility gods and rituals and the theory of the migratory soul.

When Samia was capable of such destructive power, surely Kharosa had retaliatory force more potent than animism. I had heard of z-rays and death-rays; but this was more cataclysmic, as it worked through thought on thought's un-fathomed potentialities, such as only the prophets and the raving mod have possessed. The Kharosan Ambassador's experiments with budgerigars were not as innocent as they seemed. When a diplomat was preoccupied with such hobbies, what must the scientists be doing on a national scale at home!...

Engrossed in these thoughts I walked up the red carpeted steps and, crossing the colonnaded hall, came to a spacious room which was full to capacity with guests. The Commander-in-Chief of Ratisan was delivering a speech when I arrived. Seeing the Scandalasians I worked my way up to them. The Charge d'Affaires moved a step forward to give me room, so that I stood close to his wife, and he stood right in front of me. Just behind me was the Ambassador of Bambia. Near the door stood Sir Broadguage Blooming- field and by his side, holding the curtain, was the Serpentinian Ambassador, with the Burmese Ambassador squeezed in a corner. Before I had time to get the thread of the speech everyone started clapping. My left arm was entangled in the flowing dress of the Scandalasian lady. The bald pate of her husband shone invitingly within the correct distance. With my right hand I began to clap on his hairless pate. He

did not flinch, nor did he seem to mind. So, I did not care to disentangle my left arm, and used the Charged' Affaires skull for applause. It did not feel cool, but the sound was good. It never occured to me that others would be watching; but I suppose they were too intent on the speech to notice the farce. The strange thing was that even she did not mind my treating her husband's head as a board. It seemed an every day affair, a common domestic scene....

A sudden burst of applause brought me back to consciousness of my surroundings, and I heard the words 'military aid', but could not follow what came next, as wild clapping drowned the speaker's voice.

'What did he say about military aid?'I asked my companion who was still listening to the speech.

'Kharosa has offered helicopters and army planes in aid to Ratisan,' she said, and added in answer to a query: 'I don't know how many, but quite a lot, I guess.'

I strained my ears. All I could distinctly hear was: 'Long live Rato-Kharosan friendship. Long live Kharosa. Long live Ratisan.'The speech had come to an end. I looked around and saw Ratisanian officers surging towards the Kharosan Ambassador. My eyes fell on His Excellency Buddy Bagatale who was moving towards the door followed by his sneezing Counsellor fumbling in his breast pocket. Col Bullshot, displaying an impressive array of brand new medals, stood in the middle of the room taking mental note of those who looked enthusiastic. Did that mean the end of Samian aid, or the beginning of the deluge? The memory of Dickens, read in boyhood, brought the figure of Madame de Farge before my mind knitting away the fates of men. Was it going to be a Bay of Pigs, or Bay of Sins? This thought reminded me of the cats. The time was opportune to close the deal; It was not for me, the finesse of high diplomacy, the satisfaction of possessing the omniscient radar. I looked for the Kharosan Ambassador, but he was not to be seen, and I left without saying goodbye or shaking him by the hand.

13

The press was enthusiastic about the military aid offered by Kharosa. Even the anti-Government papers welcomed the move. Samian reactions were not known, but the rats had disappeared behind the news. Was that a hopeful or disappointing sign? It was difficult to tell. Nonetheless, I sent off the following

note:'The Embassy of the People's Presidency of Bachusan presents its compliments to the Ministry of Commerce and Trade of the Government of Ratisan, and with reference to the preliminary discussions about the supply of cats, has the honour to say that the Embassy being in a position to quote the price and the number that can be supplied, requests an early meeting to discuss the details, as His Excellency the Ambassador is anxious to help the Government of Ratisan in an early eradication of the national menace which is draining the resources of the fraternal Presidency. The Embassy of the People's Presidency of Bachusan renews its assurances of the most favoured treatment and highest regard.'

As it was a Chancery letter, it had to be initialled by CDA. He brought it to me and said that mention of the Ambassador was not desirable, nor were references to the national menace and draining of the resources proper. Moreover, he pointed out, the phrase 'most favoured treatment' was a matter of high policy and the Embassy could not commit the Government to such a decision.

He was obviously jealous of my power and resented my authority. I had been Ambassador long enough to know what was diplomatic and in good form. He was not going to dictate to me any more. He was my subordinate and not my superior. I told him to send the letter off, and returned to the hotel. It was a late winter morning and pleasant in the garden with peonies in bloom. I looked at the carp in the lily pond and strolling along the gladioli walk came to the wisteria arcade. There sat the Serpentinian Ambassador with Col Bullshot, engaged in conversation.

I had been curious about the Colonel, especially since he had given my PA a lift in his car. Having received no satisfactory answer to discrete questions I had put to some of my colleagues about him, I asked CDA. He told me that Bullshot was the son of a rich tea planter, but had got into bad company. His gang was engaged in smuggling gold and currency which gave him plenty of opportunity to be vigilant and not only avoid spies and detectives but carry on intelligence activities himself. After the War he went back to his gang of smugglers and undertook some daring missions. In Italy he was kidnapped by the members of a diplomatic mission for being a spy of an enemy country, and was nailed inside a coffin and brought to the airport for shipment by plane as a corpse being flown home for burial. But for the timely suspicions of Italian customs officials he would have been buried alive in a foreign land. His next dare-devil feat was when he stole a private plane and landed in New Delhi with a cargo of gold and sterling

which he successfully disposed of, but having aroused the suspicions of customs hounds was arrested, yet managed to get released on bail put up by a rich businessman he did not even know, and melted into thin air from his hotel room. He then went back to Samia, found his gang dispersed, got married, had a child, and was divorced on grounds of cruelty and abusing his wife sexually, being a gay. When SSO needed someone to disrupt the constituted government of Indonesia he performed laudable service by disrupting the well meaning activities of Samia's own ambassador who resigned, and Bullshot almost carried off the coup against the President. Unfortunately for him, a well known anti-Samian and pro-Peking figure proved more powerful and established a controlled dictatorship.

Bullshot was diverted to Ratisan to keep the President of that country from mischief, for he was suspected of socialist leanings and displayed openly his interest in things Chinese. He was not so foolish as to steal the Sung and Ming curios from the President's palace, but he did the next best thing by whisking off the Vice Foreign Minister in the courageous kidnapping, and thus removed the active pro-Chinese ins-tigator from the scene, shipping her off to Samia where her fate was never known....

I wondered how CDA could know these details, though some of the events he mentioned were recent history. Still, I was inclined to disbelieve his account of the part played by Col Bullshot, and asked him how and where he got his information.

'Here in Micea by keeping my eyes and ears open,' he replied.

'It's all suspicious. I asked you to give me a list of people who would be useful to me. You have not given it yet. This is not going to help you.' He was much too obstinate and secretive; and I decided to report against him.

As I thought of this conversation I looked at Bullshot again. He was short but wiry, with a sallow complexion, bushy eyebrows and shifty eyes. All these were signs of a reckless and treacherous character. The Serpentinian Ambassador invited me to join them.

'You know Col Bullshot?'

'Of course,' I said, then to the Colonel: 'What do you think of the Kharosan aid?'

'Too early to say anything,' he commented and looked at a bunch of wisteria

which had attracted a buzzing black beetle.

'Nasty creatures. I was once bitten by one,' I said, following his gaze. He looked blandly, as though I were a bamboo curtain. 'And the rats?' I persisted in conversation.

'A national disaster.' That was all he would say.

'We are old friends,' the Serpentinian Ambassador informed him. 'His Excellency is very fond of shooting.'

'What do you shoot, Mr Ambassador?' the Colonel enquired warming up a little.

'Oh, anything the son of a gun can shoot, as my friend would say,' I replied with some bitterness. 'It's better than killing reputations which our friend does.'

The Serpentinian Ambassador turned pale. I knew the remark had gone home. 'Come, come,' he said, appeasing me.

'I must go,' said the Colonel standing up abruptly, and left.

I stayed on for a while, but my remark had left an unpleasant taste. As I walked away I felt I had made a faux pas. Seeing my chauffeur joking and laughing with the waiters and drivers, I decided to go for a drive. Up on the Horned Bull Hill the azaleas were in bloom.

I noticed the car was not too clean, and asked the man to open the bonnet. The engine had specks of dust, and my fingers were dirtied when I touched the air filter.

'Do you call this clean?' I asked the man.

'I drive Chewy, Excellency, and work for Excellency's chauffeur who no come.'

'Answer my question. Why isn't it clean?'

I was beside myself with anger, and punched the rogue in the stomach. The other drivers were watching. He became red in the face, and withdrew to join the other chauffeurs in a private conference. I called him, but he paid no heed to my command. He came back at last, but his looks were menacing.

'I no serve you,' he said. 'I go at once.'

'Get out!' I shouted and stamped my foot.

The rat went to the Chancery and put in his resignation on the ground he had been punched in the stomach in public. The Chancellor reported next day that the man had gone to the Foreign Office and complained. The messengers had informed CDA, but he did not mention anything tome. Yet I noticed that he looked more satisfied than usual. The drums of Ratisan had obviously carried the news all over Micea, for I saw a merry twinkle in many an eye at the Dutch reception in the evening. A remark overheard seemed significant:

'Our Third Secretary was telling me, dear, that Liston is trying out his punch on empty paunches....'

'The servants and chauffeurs have become most trying,' I said to Sir Broadguage Bloomingfield who sailed into my vision. He looked sympathetically at me, and observed:

'It's the price we have to pay for Independence. Industrialism has brought discomforts in its train. A gentleman growls on an empty stomach, you have heard, and a menial when his belly is full. You have to be patient with them '

I decided to discuss the matter with CDA in the end.

'If the man has reported to the Foreign Office,' he said, 'It does not augur well.'

'Nonsense. I was only massaging his belly. That surely is no offence.'

'Will they not say what business His Excellency the Ambassador had to massage his chauffeur's belly in public?'

'That's no argument. I did not hurt him. Persuade him to withdraw his resignation.'

That was not so easy. The man had disappeared. CDA hunted him down in his hovel, but he refused to budge from his position. I suggested that a new letter of resignation should be drafted with the word 'massaged' substituted for 'punched'. The Chancellor's help was enlisted, but the idiot would not sign it for anything. A few days were wasted over the negotiations. At long last he consented to sign a a new letter on a promise of two months' pay and a certificate of good behaviour. ...

The Chancellor reported there was great activity in the Serpentinian Embassy. He said they had presented shoes made of python and boa constrictor skins to the wives of Ratisanian officials and even clerks of the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Commerce and Trade. They were also entertaining on a lavish scale,

and petty officials were being invited by the Ambassador himself. I had noticed them dancing attendance on the officials myself, and even on CDA. I enforced security measures in the Chancery, especially as the Serpentinian Ambassador was adopting a most cordial attitude towards me which, I was certain, was not without some motive.

This cordiality seemed to coincide with the cooling off of Rato-Samian relations, and the quiet that prevailed on the Rat Front. Not that the rats had disappeared. On the contrary, stray news still appeared suggesting that they were moving in larger numbers to central areas, nearer the capital. They had lost their importance in matters of greater consequence to Ratisan, the offer of Kharosan aid and continuance of Sacerdotia's attacks on the refugee problem and the claim that over a million rats had been driven into their territory during the exodus operations. CDA felt the dispute had possibilities of developing into another Vietnam.

As my letter to the Ministry of Commerce remained un-acknowledged, I made CDA contact them. We were told that the matter was under consideration. I invited the Director of the Bureau of Trade to a quiet dinner, and presented his wife with Persian cat's skin. Yet things remained where they were. So, I asked to see the President. I was asked the purpose of my interview, and had to tell them I wanted to discuss commercial relations with emphasis on the deal under negotiation. I was informed after a fortnight that the President was too busy with urgent affairs of state to receive me. They told CDA privately that he was preoccupied with Kharosan delegations which had started pouring into the country, and were having long discussions. Samia was marking time, but the Samian press had published appreciations of Sacerdotia's demands and commented on them favourably. It was obvious that Ratisan was angling for more aid from Samia and was using Kharosa as a bait.

I was, nevertheless, perturbed, and feared for my deal. I sought the support of the British Ambassador who had maintained cordial relations with me. He smiled when I mentioned my fears to him, and sympathised with me. He informed me that perhaps Samia was interested in the negotiations.

'How would they affect Samia? I queried. 'Are not the relations between the two countries brittle at the moment? If anything, Kharosa has the lead, but does not seem to be taking the least interest in this question.'

'You have read it correctly,' he said; 'but international relations cannot be

upset so easily, though they might be disturbed temporarily, or seem so. Ratisan is trying out the neutralist threat obviously, and you know what that means. Even Nehru and Soekarno could not hold on to it. Samia wields the lever. Do you think Ratisan could afford to break with Samia? Would not Samia favour Sacerdotia if Ratisan persisted in the folly?'

'Then, in your opinion, the pendulum would swing back?' I asked.

'You never can tell,' he replied. 'As for your personal problem, I suggest you enlist the support of Col Bullshot. He is a very influential person.'

This was a bitter pill to swallow. The Colonel had been cold as fish, and we had never exchanged more than greetings or news of the weather. He resembled a psychiatrist at the Academy who used to watch everyone from a distance in a cold, inscrutable way, suggesting by his attitude that he was the only sane person in a crowd of lunatics, whereas we were really of sound mind and he was the only schizophrenic, keeping his observations to himself.

So, I did not act on Sir Broadguage's advice, and sought an interview with the Chef du Cabinet. Even this was delayed, and I threatened that since the very purpose of my accreditation was being thwarted there seemed no purpose in my staying on in the country, and that it would be better to wind up the Mission and go back.

At last the Prime Minister received me. He was cordial and asked for news of our President and Chief Minister, and complained that we did not meet more often.

'I have a weekly meeting with other Heads of Missions,' he said. 'Why can't we meet regularly to keep in touch with each other's affairs? I used to see your Minister frequently.'

'You mean, our First Secretary?' I said correcting him.

'Is he only First Secretary? He deserves better,' he com-mented.

That was news to me. The worm had never told me that he was taking the liberty of troubling the Prime Minister himself! That was another black mark for his report.

When I told the Chef du Cabinet about the deal and the answers to the queries made by his officials, he said that everyone had been preoccupied with trade delegations and urgent matters of state.

'Does that mean a change in Ratisan's foreign policy?' I asked.

'We stand by our friends,'he observed, 'but We need more aid than we have been getting, especially in view of the attitude of Sacerdotia. We should like to settle our disputes by peaceful means, but if an inch of our sacred soil is endangered, we shall insist on surrender or death.'

'I gather your dispute with Sacerdotia may be referred to the Security Council. If it is, we maybe of some help to you.'

'If it is,' said he, 'we shall have to depend on the help of our friends.'

'I shall be only too pleased to use my personal influence with our President. He is already anxious to help you overcome the rat menace.'

'Thank you, Excellency. I am aware how keen you are to finalize the negotiations. I shall convey your anxiety to the Minister concerned...'

14

The Minister wrote a personal letter suggesting a meeting to discuss the deal. It was a brain wave that I had in mentioning the dispute with Sacerdotia. CDA said that the Ratisanians were in a tight corner and were counting their friends in case matters did go that far. He was right. Otherwise, they would not have hastened the negotiations which had been delayed so long.

The meeting was successful from the start. In fact, it was a coffee party. The Minister was assisted by his Deputy and the Director in charge. Also present were representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Commerce and Finance. I had only CDA to rely upon, but his help was not needed at all. I sold two thousand cats at the rate of forty dollars apiece, freight and other expenses to be paid by the Government of Ratisan. This meant eighty thousand dollars for the Government in foreign exchange.

The ceremony of signing the deal was photographed so lavishly that the light of flash-bulbs began to hurt my eyes. The news was telecast and broadcast over the radio, and the morning papers carried it on the front page with pictures of the ceremony. The telephone kept ringing as everyone wished to offer his congratulations, including Buddy Baga- tale and the Kharosan Ambassador who, perhaps, appreciated it the most, for it was likely to upset the Samian programme.

The Ambassador of Burma came in person.

'You seem to have upset the apple-cart, Excellency. Felicitations,' he said, smiling sardonically.

I could not follow, and my beaming face became a question mark.

'Whose?' I asked. 'The Samian's? I could not expect to stop an international conspiracy practised by no less a power than Samia. What are two thousand cats in the face of millions of rats? You should have seen them to believe how many they were in the Exodus to the Bay of Sins and beyond '

'No. Not Samia's, but Serpentinia,' he said.

I was as pleased with this news as I was with the deal itself. Filled with curiosity, I leaned forward and said:

'That's most interesting. Tell me more about it, Excellency. He could it upset the Serpentinians? I have only sold a few cats,' I added, feigning ignorance of the Serpentinian Ambassador's designs.

Exactly,' he replied. 'You know, he was negotiating a deal in deadly snakes that hole up with rats and devour them too. He was so upset that he missed a dinner at the Embassy of Spain. I saw him this morning. He was fidgety and pale '

And a good thing it was. I could crush better ones than him like a python a goat. And to boost my enthusiasm, the Chief of Protocol rang up a few days later that he had found a house for me. It required renovation, he said, but if I liked it he could have it requisitioned for the Embassy.

It was situated in a bylane, but the compound was private and the house spacious. There was a row of narrow rooms which divided the outer courtyard from the main compound, but if the rooms were demolished the garden could become large; and with a veranda added to the house it could become comfortable and better than many. It would take quite some months to have it ready, but then I would have a house at last and live my own life undisturbed by the prying eyes of men. I asked for it to be requisitioned, and the Chief of Protocol promised to send the landlord to discuss the alterations and terms of the lease.

I settled down to an easy round of dinners and cocktails at which I found I was now the centre of attraction.

'Do tell me about your cats, Excellency,' said the Italian Secretary's wife. 'We hear they are as big as leopards.'

'Are they really green in colour and crouch in the stalks of grain so that the rats cannot see them apart from the leaves?' asked the wife of the Turkish Consul's wife.

'Congratulations, Mr Ambssador,' said the wife of the envoy of Spain. 'I am sure we shall be rid of the rodent menance.'

'And pretty girls escape the persecuting rats,' added the wife of the Counsellor of Sweden.

And they talked in groups and couples:

'How cute of him, indeed. Don't you think so, my dear?'

'I wish we had thought of it overselves....'

'But think, what would Samia say with all their pesticide and economic aid?'

'What cheek to vie with such a power!'

'Nothing succeeds like success.'

'O the Ambassador of Serpentinia. Poor dear. His Excellency the Burmese Ambassador was telling us how upset he is. He was hoping to sell snakes, you know. And now the cats are coming.'

'You know, Vera dear, I had a Persian cat once, but it would not even hurt a mouse. They used to play hide and seek in its long fur. All it did was to paw them away when they crawled over its ears.'

'And my Siamese played with them as with a ball of wool. It was a wonderful sight. How intelligent they are, the Siamese. I wish I could have mine again.'

'The wonder is the Ratisanians agreed to the deal, with all their fetish about killing rats.'

'Pesticide was doing the same thing.'

'That is quite a different matter. Pesticide kills mercifully. Cats murder them in cold blood and eat them too.'

'I wouldn't be surprised if the SPCA comes out with a plea to cancel the deal on humanitarian grounds.'

'It's a wonder they haven't done so already.'

'You never know.'

'Ratisan must have surely seen some advantage in signing the deal....'

And more serious discussions were reported to me centering round Samian indifference and Kharosa's silence which, it was said, could not be without significance. CDA thought otherwise. He said that no one could be worried by such a deal, unless it be overselves or Serpentinia, perhaps, out of the sheer pique. It was such small diplomacy. According to him the problem was so colossal that two thousand cats could never meet the situation.

'Where would they attack the rats?' he asked. 'In an area of two hundred thousand miles two thousand cats would mean only one cat per hundred miles or 0.01 per cent, which is infinitesimal. Even if they concentrated them in one area, the rats would migrate to another and disperse in all directions.'

'But the cats would follow,' I said sharply.

Provided they got nothing else to eat, and the rats were easy to catch in open fields. Barns and houses, yes, perhaps, but never in miles upon hundred miles of waving crops...

He was jealous of my success and the glory in whose sunshine I was basking, I was quite annoyed and dismissed him as my landlord arrived to sign the lease and discuss the alterations. I got busy with the renovation of the house, and put the Chancellor in charge of the work.

As it was taking shape, advice came that the cats had been shipped. They eventually arrived, and I sent CDA to see that they were safely off-loaded and delivered to the Ratisanian authorities at the port. It was not an easy job, he told me on return from what I called Operation Cats. In the first place the off-loaders were frightened of the animals which had become ferocious on account of imprisonment and, perhaps, lack of proper food on the voyage. The Ratisanians had managed to collect a few thousand rats, but it was difficult to feed them to the cats. When they were released inside the cages most rats escaped as the grills of the cages were about four inches square. Those that were caught by the cats became bones of contention and led to mauling and fights, with the result that no one was willing to come near the cages again. In the confusion one hungry cat escaped. Luckily one of the keepers who had come from Bachusan noticed the cat escape through a cage door which she had managed to loosen, and quickly

secured it against further possibility of accident. The escaped animal, however, created a scare and the Ratisanians ran helter-skelter for life. The news spread like wild fire and someone telephoned the Police Headquarters and a fully armed posse of Police soon arrived followed by afire-fighting squad. It was just as well the Army were not called.

In the meantime the cat was so hungry that it ran after the escaped rats which hid behind heavy equipment and crates that lay scattered on the jetty. She managed to get two clear of obstructions and drove them into the open. The rodents had, however, a clear start and ran followed by the cat. She almost caught one of them, but they had reached the very edge of the jetty and fell ten feet below into the water, the cat jumping after them. When the Police arrived she was almost drowning. Being terribly excited and scared by the reports which had made the cat out to be a tiger, a policeman took aim and fired, killing the feline brute. In any case, the Ratisanians had seen our cats in action. I had no doubt they would make a good job of the rats.

This matter settled and put aside, I could see clearly as through the crystal water of a stream. The Chancery was now humming. I felt certain that I had succeeded in containing CDA, but his cynicism and sceptical appraisal of the deal annoyed me and kept me worried. Yet I felt I was securely in the saddle, and one report from me could un-saddle him in no time. I had enough ammunition now to fire the shot and blow him up lock, stock and barrel. The time for the annual confidential reports on the staff was not too far off. ...

I took my Scandalasian love to the house on the pretext of advice on the garden and interior decoration. She was excited at the prospect of designing the flower beds and, I persuaded her, the other beds too.

'A bedroom is, after all, a woman's world,' I said, 'of which she is the only queen.'

'A bed is a place to sleep in,' she replied, 'and wherever one sleeps is a bed. For me a lawn is as good a place as any under the twinkling stars. I do not mind sharing my secret with them. They are so responsive and add to the poetry of life.'

I held different views. Having read Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* with Savitri, my Academy days friend Ananda's sister, I desired a woman who was adept at spreading and arranging couches and flowers, and knew the art of making beds and spreading cushions for reclining, so that we could indulge in coral and jewel

biting, the throbbing kiss and the splitting of bamboo congress. How I yearned for these long forgotten pleasures. The grass was no substitute for the white sheets on a springy mattress. But in deference to her wish, we started coming in the evening when the workmen had gone and we had the place to ourselves alone. On such occasions, whenever she could invent an excuse and get away from her husband alone, I drove the car myself. But I did mind sharing the secret with the stars which reminded me of Toon-toon who was perhaps a better confidante in circumstances more rough and unenviable than these.

On one such evening as the moon rose over the high parapet wall, she said in great confidence:

'I am tired of this life of ostracism in Ratisan. We are not fully recognised by the Government, as you know, and have only semi-official status in Micea. Why can't you persuade them to give my husband full recognition to which he is entitled. After the break of relations between our countries over a Ratisanian revolutionary whom we had given asylum, we were allowed to stay on to look after the properties of Scandalasians and those of our Mission, and per-form consular functions without diplomatic privileges. We are not invited to official functions, the one in your honour by the Minister of Trade being a rare exception, I suppose because our two countries are on such friendly terms. We have asked for transfer, but if we go no replacement would be allowed in Ratisan. So, our own Foreign Office has dumped and forgotten us here ...'

'Anything for you. my sweetheart. I will shake up even the skies like a dead geranium.'

And to spite the goddess of heaven, I took her in the shade of a white oleander to escape the magic and machinations of the ogling stars and the moon.

15

The dust had hardly settled on the cats and the rats had been pushed into the background when news started appearing that Sacerdotia was on the war path. She first signed a deal with Kharosa for the supply of arms including military aircraft, missiles, electronic equipment, then published inspired articles in her press accusing Ratisan of a massive arms build up and purchasing further military supplies from Samia. 'It is obvious,' said the semi-Government *Sacred Times,* 'that these are preparations for an excuse to commit another aggression

against our country. Ratisan had always had designs against our North-Western Province,' continued the paper, 'and her policies have been directed towards acquiring this rich area which is the granary and life-line of Sacerdotia. To this end they drove their rats to our borders, and have recently intensified their efforts at pushing them into our territories. They have started migrating in a new wave, thus threatening our crops ready to be harvested.' The Sacerdotian Premier, interviewed by World News Service, said that Ratisan has been insisting on aggression, naked and blatant, against peace-loving Sacerdotia. Ratisan has been building up a national scare against us and arming herself at the cost of her economic development and the interests of her people who are, as a consequence, faced with starvation. The Ratisanian Government must take heed,' continued the statement, 'and curb these mega-lomaniac activities and give up her aggressive designs against us. I call upon her President to see reason and pursue a line of peace in the larger interests of humanity and adopt a policy of live and let live.'

The Ratisanians reacted at once, and cited facts and figures to show that the boot was on the other leg. The Defence Minister issued a statement saying that Sacerdotia had acquired huge quantities of modern weapons from other countries and increased her Armed Forces Budget in 1967-68 ten times its already inflated figure of 1964-65. Her standing Army, continued the statement, consisted of more than 200,000 men backed by large territorial and paramilitary forces. Most of the equipment purchased by Sacerdotia from other powers, by diverting economic aid, concluded the Defence Minister, could only be used against Ratisan.

The next day Ratisanian news agencies released statements by political observers accusing Sacerdotia of hoodwinking the world and camouflaging her expansionist designs. The facts of the case, according to them, were that Sacerdotia had usurped a good deal of fertile Ratisanian land along the Northern borders and amalgamated it in what is now their North-Western Province. When the UN Commission for the Regularisation of Rato-Sacerdotian frontier gave an award in favour of Ratisan, Sacerdotia, under one pretext or another, shelved the settlement and continued to build up her armed strength on the excuse of protecting herself against eventual attacks, and managed to get aid and more aid both from Samia and Kharosa which could only be used against Ratisan. 'But we cannot be deceived by these subterfuges,' the observers declared. 'Sacerdotia's tremendous war preparations, her intransigence over the basic

dispute and past record of backing out of international agreements exposed the hollowness of her claim. It's not Ratisan that is making aggressive preparations. Sacerdotia must honour her commitments, and stop arming herself. She should not forget we know how to defend ourselves.'

The same newspaper published a news agency report from a third country to the effect that Sacerdotia had begun unusual military manoeuvres along the 122 mile long frontier between the Northern Province and Ratisan. Quoting dispatches from the Sacerdotian capital it said that the Sacerdotian Security forces stationed along the border had been considerably increased. At the same time, a member of the Sacerdotian Parliament revealed in the House that not long ago great military activity had been noticed on the border areas of Ratisan and experiments were carried out with secret weapons supplied by Samia. He even accused Bachusan of being a party to the conspiracy and cited secret information he possessed that the ambassadors of Samia and Bachusan had been seen in those areas at the time, and that their presence there at the same time was not without significance....

I knew it was a lie; but I was worried lest the news reached Bachusan. What repercussions would it have? I could not foresee, but felt it could lead to complications. I could, of course, explain it away. Had I not sent a report on the exodus to the Hon'ble President himself? But then, there were nit-wits in the Foreign office. Some silly clerk or official could start a hare by sending up a note. I had seen during my few weeks in the Foreign Office how they were constantly playing this game to twist the ambassadors' tails and maintain their hold over them, their movements and activities.

I mentioned this to Toon-toon who had accompanied me on the trip.

'You and I saw with our own eyes the armies of rats driven by an unknown force,' he said. 'That alone could be ascribed to some secret device. But it was more of votive ritual than a scientific experiment, a kind of religious frenzy that led to the watery harakiri. No one will believe the Sacerdotian's claim.'

'You never know. The Burmese Ambassador had information from some reliable source that the Samian Ambassador had gone there not merely to see the rats, but on some such mission as is alleged by Sacerdotia.'

'Were there not all kinds of rumours during the War? Of napalm and poison gas and a hundred other strange devices that destroyed instantly. Would GHQ have believed that you employed them? Did your Government join the alleged

conspiracy? If not, how could you be blamed for visiting the South-Western border in the execution of a simple diplomatic duty? I would put no store by it, General. You should keep your mind at rest. These are old wives' tales not worthy of soldiers' ears. In the trenches, maybe, where nerves are always on edge and life threatened every moment. But we never funked on the field of battle. Why should you in time of peace?'

There was logic in what Toon-toon said and suppressed my doubts. But when news came that the rats were really crossing into the North-Western Province in large numbers, CDA said that the cats were behind the new exodus.

'What if the cats follow them into Sacerdotian territory?' he asked.

'Good riddance of the cats and the rats', I rejoined.

'It's not as simple as that,' he said seriously but, I felt, with a mischievous intent. 'It may lead to further political complications.'

'How on earth?' I said getting irritated. 'It would be at worst a natural calamity.'

'Not when it is known that we supplied the cats.'

'Nonsense,' said I. 'How could we be held responsible for their escaping into Sacerdotia? You are talking through your hat.'

I was so annoyed that I decided to send the confidential report on CDA, which I had already written, by the next diplomatic bag, and get rid of him and his sarcastic criticism for ever.

After it had gone, however, certain new developments took place. The cats did start crossing over to the North- Western Province of Sacerdotia albeit in small numbers. Nevertheless, Sacerdotia protested to Ratisan, and spoke of refering the matter to the Security Council. The news item also spoke of the resentment felt against the role played by Bachusan in the conspiracy by supplying the feline beasts. CDA was right in his appraisal, but I felt spited for he had used his analytical and prophetic powers against me and my better judgement. I decided not to consult him or encourage him in his nefarious designs.

This was followed by great diplomatic activity. The Corps Diplomatique of Micea become alert. I heard that the Serpentinian Ambassador was jubilant at the news and laughed at my expense. The Burmese Ambassador showed great concern and sympathy.

'What's going to happen now, Excellency?' he said to me looking truly agitated. 'What will be Bachusan's attitude?'

'How are we concerned?' I replied. 'We only tried to help Ratisan in her calamity. It was for them to keep the cats well within the country. They should have known better and released the rat-killers in areas that were safe. If they go and make a mess of a simple thing, what can we do? If I were in their place I would have harnessed them in teams as we used to do the POWs during the War, and made the cats destroy the rats area by area, mile by mile, and not let them loose at random as the Ratisanians have foolishly done.'

'That is true indeed,' he agreed. 'I wish you had offered this advice and planned the expedition for them which only an experienced General like your Excellency could do and execute.'

I was much flattered by the compliment, but the Ambassador continued:

'In any case, now that the matter has taken this ugly turn, what strategy would you advise?'

'Easy, Excellency. As in war, so in diplomacy, the one who takes the initiative has the advantage on his side. I would go to the UN and demand immediate return of populace abducted against its will, as. Israel successfully did in the case of passengers on the plane hi-jacked to Algeria...'

'That's it,' he ejaculated even before I had finished the sentence. 'You are a genius, Excellency. You should really be the President and not waste your talent in Ratisan. You must suggest it at once to His Excellency the President of Ratisan. It's a matter of high policy and should not be discussed at a lower level.'

'I am glad you approve of my plan,' I said, secretly pleased. 'In fact, I have already set the ball rolling.'

This was not true, but I could act on the decision arrived at so casually but full of possibilities I could hardly imagine

In the days that followed, political activity continued unabated. The Chef du Cabinet was busy having secret discussions with accredited envoys of different countries. When I was called by him, I gave him my appraisal of the situation and delineated in confidence the strategy, and suggested the action Ratisan should take in the circumstances. He reacted immediately and thanked me profusely.

'The suggestion has your Government's approval, of course', he asked rather optimistically.

'Not exactly, Excellency,' I replied, suddenly thinking of CDA and becoming cautious. 'The strategy struck me as the most effective. I have tried it out successfully myself during the War.'

'It sounds most interesting,' he observed becoming somewhat lukewarm. 'But we shall have to depend on our friends for support in the Security Council. Can we count on Bachusan?'

'I will write to my Government,' I replied.

'It's of utmost importance, Excellency. Much will depend on the outcome at the UN,' he said standing up and preferring his hand.

My idea had gone home, and I felt both proud and happy. But when it come to drafting the telegram I scratched the bald patch at the back of my head and scratched. The right words did not come to me. How was I to confess that it was all a figment of my brain? Would not the Foreign Secretary turn back and call me a stooge? So, I had to tell CDA. He raised his eyebrows and made a wry, disapproving face. I felt my blood congeal.

'Well, can't you think of some way to put the idea across?'

'It's your diplomacy,' he replied uncooperatively, 'how can I change its course?'

'But I have to tell the Government. I stand committed to the Chef du Cabinet.'

'What you have said to him is between you and him. What you have to say to the Foreign Office is not as simple as commiting the President in absentia to something he never said.'

I felt as though I had been slapped by a subaltern. It was quite different from his usual style. Had he come to know about the confidential report? But the telegram had to be sent.

'Is that what you were recruited to the Foreign Service for?' I said in a loud voice and added, as I got a sudden brain wave: 'Just say that the Ratisanian Government contemplates the action and wants our support in the UN.'

'And when we are asked to give the background of the move and the details of the incident, how shall we explain?'

'I want no arguments. Just send the telegram as I have said.'

'As you please,' he said, and the telegram was sent at last.

There was silence on the political front for a few days, then *The Hot Ball* came out with a strongly worded editorial condemning Sacerdotia for its 'insincerity, hostility and hypocrisy towards Ratisan,' saying that 'these base elements had been the underlying principles of its policy which had embittered relations between the two countries.' It went on to recount the history of the dispute and to accuse Sacerdotia of fabricating the 'blatant lie' of rodents and cats crossing over to her North Western Province, thus 'hoodwinking the world in order to consolidate its immoral and illegal acquisitions and further its ambitions by trumpeting a cause based on chauvinism, hypocrisy and lies.' The real facts, it said, were that Sacerdotia had kidnapped the cats and the rats with them. It went on to say that 'the Sacerdotian leaders' tirades against Ratisan, and their clamour against Kharosan military aid to this country is no more than a smoke screen for the usurpation of our land, and for further expansionist designs.' The editorial concluded that Ratisan could not be bullied so easily and that 'besides military preparedness, we should be mentally and spiritually equipped to assert the truth, fighting first through the international peace agency of UN to uphold the principles of truth and justice, even if the alternative amounts to a long-drawn struggle.'

This was symptomatic; and true enough, four days later I was called by the Chef du Cabinet and asked if I had received a reply from my Government. When I told him it was too early to expect an answer, he informed me that the President had been pleased with my suggestion and felt personally grateful and that it had, consequently, been decided to move the Security Council.

On the day Ratisan's application came up for hearing their Representative gave the history of the dispute and deplored the military preparations being made by Sacerdotia and condemned her latest aggressive designs in reinforcing the security forces along the border and kidnapping the population and livestock including the cats. He demanded their return and called upon Sacerdotia to desist from making false accusations against Ratisan. 'The repeated attacks made by Sacerdotia and the large scale and carefully planned manoeuvres along the border,' he said, 'constitute evident and overt threats to peace. Surely, the United Nations cannot watch these flagrant intentions of violating the peace of the area in silence, and must take cognizance of intended aggression and effective measures to contain the aggressor. If this is not done, and the powers of the Security Council are misused, it would only lead to the decline of its authority

already on the wane.'

The Sacerdotian Representative made a counter protest in reply, and condemned Ratisan in stronger terms for the same acts and intentions of which Ratisan had accused Sacerdotia. The Samian Representative standing up next said that the Council dealt with causes and not symptoms. So far, he said, what the Ratisanian Representative had pointed out in his spirited account did not amount to any act of specific aggression, only intentions.

'None of the parties,' he said, 'seems without guilt. It is the responsibility of every member of this august body to do all he can to maintain peace both international and local otherwise the world would become a bedlam. Sacerdotia should do what it can to prevent an attack on Ratisan and Ratisan in turn, should avoid provocation and try to settle her dispute peacefully by negotiation in a spirit of amity. Any lasting peace,' he added, 'can result only through agreement of the parties concerned.'

The Kharosan Ambassador at the UN stated that the Council 'will duly take into account any acts of direct or of overt aggression when they have taken place. Sympathy for Sacerdotia may encourage Sacerdotia. Similarly with Ratisan. These nations,' he asserted, 'must share responsibility for any likely incidents. Peace in the area,' he con- culded, 'depended on Sacerdotia and Ratisan, and the establishment of peace talks between the parties concerned.. ..'

That was a plain rebuff. No other nation dared speak after that. The life-and-death issue was shelved so simply, and firmness asserted in the larger interests of the world controlled by the few, and of bigger issues involving the Great Powers. For once, it was clear, it did not suit either Samia or Kharosa to encourage the little clods of clay formed as a result of power upheavals that shook the bigger chunks of solid earth every once or so in a century, and threw out superfluous dust under hidden volcanic pressure, as sparks from a giant furnace that glowed for a while, like a bubble on the surface of water, and died a natural death never to be noted or noticed again. The vultures fattened on carrion, I had seen with my own eyes, on the battle fields, and pigs on offal.

Like Sacerdotia my own peace was disturbed. My days in Ratisan were darkened just when the house was almost finished and ready for occupation. In political activities and the whirl of diplomatic life which was one eternal social round, I had forgotten all about the Foreign Office and that things could bfc otherwise than rosy. There is no doubt that I had received no communication

other than routine by diplomatic bag for months, not a line from the President or the Foreign Secretary appreciating my services. I had put it down to laziness and the habit of posting and forgetting envoys which was so typical of the Government. But when I did hear from home it was most disturbing.

It seemed they were receiving my reports all right, but they were looking at them through the wrong end of the binoculars. They had formed all twisted and wrong impressions. Or was someone else giving them a different picture? It could only be CDA, and he had shown himself in his true colours. He was not only a worm but a snake in the grass.

The communication that I received from the Foreign Secretary was couched in a language as cold as ice.

'We have been watching your activities in Ratisan,' said the letter. 'Whereas the administration of your Mission has been tightened up and we are receiving most returns with greater regularity and on schedule, your own monthly reports have left much to be desired. It seems you are not utilising the experience and services of the First Secretary to the fullest extent, and are apt to make assessments which lack sound judgement and understanding of political background. For instance, take the cat deal. We were not too cheerful about it, even though it brought us some foreign exchange. Subsequent events have proved that it was no commodity worth trading in. You are undoubtedly aware of the developments. In the first place, Samia did not want total destruction of rats in your area, as you know, and we have no desire of getting on the wrong side of Samia. Secondly, it has led to resentment in Sacerdotia. You are cognizant of our foreign policy which is based on friendly relations with all countries. We are surprised how you could forget this in making a recommendation that we support Ratisan's application in the Security Council over their current dispute. You should have, instead, briefed us fully on the case and guided the Government as to the right course of action. We had to ask the Ratisanian Ambassdor here for details. For your information, when he pressed us for a decision we had to tell him that in the light of our relations with the countries concerned, we had no alternative but to remain neutral. We knew what attitude Samia and Kharosa were going to adopt which, by the way, was really for you to apprise us of.

'Which brings me to the impression that you have not succeeded in cultivating the envoys of countries that matter and are hobnobbing with shady characters and making friends with diplomats of no calibre. At the same time you should

know which situations to avoid; and you had no business to walk in the shoes of the Samian Ambassador when he was visiting the border on a top secret mission. You must have seen honourable mention of your name in the Sacerdotian Parliament. That was no compliment to Bachusan. . .

Whereas I had got off lightly where I feared repercussions most, I had been placed on the gridiron, and marvelled at the yogi I has seen once in India s'eeping on it in peace. At a reception that evening at the Swiss Legation I was in a bad mood which was intensified by the coldness of Sir Broadgage whom I had tried to draw into a conversation. But he had gone over to Col Bullshot and was engaged in a long conversation with him, after which I had seen him talking to the Serpentinian Ambassador. Everyone had seemed to be busy whispering, and I had felt lonely and left alone. I walked over to Col Bullshot who stood in a Conner by himself watching everyone as was his habit. We exchanged a few words of greeting, but he did not seem to have anything to say to me.

'You know, Excellency,' I whispered, 'diplomats are fools. . ..' He was flabbergasted and looked completely shocked.

'You are mistaken,' was all he said, and I escaped into the garden. My evening was thoroughly spoiled, and I could hardly sleep at night.

In the morning I walked over to CDA's room with complete sangfroid and a happy expression on my face.

'I had a letter from the Foreign Secretary,' I told him. He looked at me with tilted head and a question mark in his eyes so as to say: What does he write?

'He says,' I added, 'that your work has not been up to the mark.'

'Really?' he said wetting his lips with his tongue so that his long nose almost touched its tip. His face at the moment reminded me of the gargoyles on Notre Dame in Paris. 'May I see the Foreign Secretary's letter?'

'Well, he discusses confidential matters; but I shall give you the relevant extract. In the meantime, you will give me a complete history of the Rato-Sacerdotian dispute with an up to date resume of the case as discussed in the Security Council. You will also prepare drafts of my Monthly Reports in future. That is the only way of improving your record. If you had been more cooperative I could have raised you to the top .'

The thrust seemed to have gone home, for his face had darkened with

resentment and shame. Before leaving I added:

'And I want that report by tomorrow.'

'It's impossible to prepare it in such a short time.'

'By tomorrow I said. You could have till the afternoon,' I said and went out. He came after me and said:

'May I look at the reports you have sent? I am unaware of the discussions you have had with the Ratisan s or other diplomats.'

'That is beside the point,' I replied dryly. 'What I said is not involved. You were the darling of the Foreign Office. I must also see what you can do.' And I closed the door behind me.

He did bring his notes next day, but I was going out, having been called by the Director of Intercontinental Affairs, and asked him to leave the papers with me. The Director had only to inform me that the Attorney General of Samia who was also the son-in-law of Samia's President was coming on a state visit the next morning and was going to be received by the President himself. All Heads of Missions were required to assemble at the Foreign Office at 7.30 a.m. and go to the airport in order of precedence.

That was a nuisance. There was a dinner at the Zora- strian Embassy, which promised to be interesting. The Ambassador of Zorastria had recently come to Ratisan with a young and beautiful wife who was frustrated, and therefore a ripe fruit ready for plucking, the Ambassador himself being senile and over seventy. At most functions, to which my Scandalasian sweetheart was not invited, I had taken every opportunity of paying court to Her Excellency and had enjoyed every minute of her company. Only a few days ago she had reminded me of the dinner and had talked with deep intimacy, laughing and joking with unusual vivacity. There was a secret invitation in her eyes, and I had felt drunk and had toasted her and, at parting, had kissed her hand, and she had pressed mine most invitingly, affirming that her desire was mine, and had said with the soft sad music of violins just before love awakens, that after the dinner we could have a rendezvous in her garden which was large and thickly planted with arbours and hidden corners designed by her predecessor for love and amorous meetings. They had come late to the Swiss reception, just as I was leaving, but she had bent aside and whispered:

'You remember the rendezvous?...' In spite of my depressed mood I had felt

the flame of love singe my being.

It was inflamed into a conflagration that evening when I saw the intensity of desire in her eyes which looked exceptionally drunk and appealing, seeking me out and communicating the message of love and life with a crashing crescendo, so that I was lifted out of my self and soared to the very heaven, floating past the astral beauties, the cherubs and the seraphims.

Drinks were served in the garden, and conversation buzzed in my ears like the drone of busy bees. They were talking of the happenings of the past few weeks and of the sudden occupation of Chickacockio by the forces of Kharosa and her allies without provocation, and dismissing it as something unimportant, which would blow over after the undesirable leaders, the so-called counter-revolutionaries, opposed to Kharosa were dismissed. The anxiety of Samia and England was appreciated, for the events in Chickocockia showed how world peace was threatened and their own security endangered. That is why the Security Council had gone immediately into action, they said, and the capitals of the world seethed with activity. No one mentioned the rebuff to Ratisan which was of no consequence.

And the ladies exchanged the usual gossip, their gowns trailing on the grass or their backs and necks glowing in the dim light of coloured lamps, their jewellery of tinsel or gold reflecting back the light. Weaving in and out of them, laughing here and scintillating there, the hostess had found her way to me gaily ever so often and pressed more drinks on me. As she found me alone once she led me by subterfuge of showing a rare orchid, while a few other guests strayed on the secret paths and admired the roses, to a secluded corner of the garden where, against a background of yaupon and Sydney-wattle, and hedged in by lantana and *amur privet,* were groves of Grootendorst rose and duranta, and stone seats by little ponds with hyacinths and lotus, while tall eucalyptus and poplar trees stood sentinel along the high compound wall. It was a place more private than the mind and more cosy than the heart.

There, secluded from the prying eyes of the guests, she looked at me with such longing that I was transported, back to the Academy. She needed no cajoling and holding me by the hand looked into my eyes with such passionate surrender, as of the moon after the assault of the astronauts, that I was beside myself, my desire bursting out of physical trappings, and I pressed her hard to my chest, my mouth seeking her burning lips to consummate the bliss that was mine.

'Later,' she whispered fighting free, 'right here, my newfound love, when the guests have departed, you and I...'

We worked our way back as soft voices sounded not too far from our hiding place, she to mingle her laughter with conversation, I to revel in wine already drunk and still to be tasted, the goddess of Luck having fallen at my feet. And His Excellency the host sat talking to the Counsellor of Samia and Broadguage Bloomingfield, their expressions tense and serious. I recalled what I had said to Bullshot. Diplomats were really fools!

At dinner we sat at well-laid tables, four by four, with tables back, sides and front, so that one could get snatches of a medley of conversation. Fortunately there was no protocol, and my companions were a foreign journalist, his ugly wife, and the Commercial Attache of Portugal to whom I had been talking, and thus avoided the company of senior diplomats who would have taken me into the heart of the circle for which I was in no mood at all, so that I was left to myself and the image in my heart.

At the next table they were talking of the Kharosan sphere of influence and of the Police Force discussed at the Peace Conference in Geneva at the League of Nations after the First World War, and the names of Sir Henry Wilson and Marshall Foch, Badoglio and Clemenceau were being freely mentioned.

'The UN is following in the footsteps of the League of Nations...'

'But think of the benefits to humanity...

'In the past any revision of political situations could be affected by war alone.'

'And today?'

'The Great Powers stand, through the UN, for perpetrating the status quo.'

'And humanity? ...'

'In Rome the word was rabble. In Chinese the only way you could translate 'people' in the context is by calling them the common or vulgar people....'

'And the servants, my dear, are rats. I gave the Number Two boy a letter to put in the letter box. Luckily I went into the kitchen, he was putting it in the sink.'

'I once asked a servant to see if there was air in my bicycle. The fool took a long time, and when he did come back, said: 'There *is*,,but only in the front wheel!'

'If you are in China, be careful. A new cook I had once employed asked me if I liked to eat lice. I was horrified ....'

'How is Chickacockia differing from Kharosa?' I asked the Attache as the waiter poured out wine.

'If I can see rightly, they are wanting to revive private ownership....'

'Talking of bandits, once the wife of my first ambassador was kidnapped by bandits in the days of the War Lords, not far away from Peking. They took her into the hills, kept and fed her well, and waited. Getting tired, she went to the chief bandit and asked him if they were putting her up for ransom. 'That's right,' he replied. 'You will, in that case,' said she, 'waste your food and care on me. I was never beautiful and now, as you can see, I am old and feeble. My husband will be glad to get rid of me.' The old bandit let her go quietly.... '

We had hardly finished dessert when there was a commotion as though something untoward had happened. The guests were rising from their seats whispering, full of subdued surprise. I looked at the journalist.

'What could have happened?' he asked me in his turn.

'I am as ignorant as you,' I replied.

'I must find out,' he said and disappeared.

'The guests were shuffling their way. Some still had serviettes in their hands, some were throwing them at the nearest tables. My eyes fell on the Ambassador of Burma who had seen me already and was walking towards me.

'Has the old Ambassador had a heart attack? I asked.

'I don't know, Excellency. It must have been something terrible. I was at a table near the host when, as dessert was being served, a Secretary came up to His Excellency and whispered something into his ear. Sir Broadguage and the wife of the Kharosan Minister must have heard the whisper, I am sure. The old Ambassador turned ashen, rallied out of his chair, reeled, and walking like one demented, disappeared inside the building—and never came out again. He must have had a stroke, or perhaps his aged King's head must have been cut off and rolled on the ground. For his Counsellor came and apologised to Sir Broadguage who immediately put his serviette down and stood up. Others followed suit. I don't really know what actually happened!

I thought it had been contrived by my darling in right royal Eastern fashion, as in the stories Aunt Zerimagerused to tell. And in the melee that ensued I walked unnoticed to the secluded corner of the garden which was our appointed rendezvous to await the desired developmeuts. In my excitement of the evening I had drunk a good deal of wine, and as I sat down on the stone seat by the lotus pond, my head whirled so that I could not fix my gaze on the stars without seeing the motion of the sky as it revolved in its diurnal course, going round and round. I steadied myself and in order to visualise her haunting face, closed my eyes, but felt I was sitting on a merry-go-round.

I must have sat for a long time thus, and gone to sleep, for when I woke up the roosters were crowing. I jumped out of my seat and looked around. My side was empty of love, the Embassy building, a dark and dreary mass, was outlined against the empty sky, the trees overhanging like ghosts and genii. Fear gripped me as I suddenly remembered the early morning assembly at the Foreign Office, bring-ing me back to unremitting reality of the earth. My love had played false and jilted me like the Princess in the Arabian Nights. I was caught within the compound and must get out. When I went to the gate I found it locked, the exit barred. If I was discovered in the garden all was lost. Awareness of danger sharpened my wits. If I stood on the watchman's stool which I saw near the gate, I could clamber up the wall. In sheer desperation I stepped on to one side of the wooden stool and upturned it with a noise which roused the Embassy dog which came barking. Hurriedly I got on to the stool again and, catching hold of the edge of the wall, was clambering up when the beast jumped frantically and grabbed a leg of my trousers. Luckily he did not dig his teeth into my flesh. I jerked my foot free though I lost half a leg of the trousers in the struggle. Quickly I jumped over to the other side on the road, and looked for my car. There was no sign of a vehicle. My driver must have waited and gone.

I had hardly recovered from the shock when an iron hand clasped me by the wrist. A policeman on night patrol had obviously seen me jump and taken me in his hold. I tried to push him away.

'Not so easy, you thief!' he said and swore.

'Let go of my hand,' I shouted. 'I'm the Ambassador of Bachusan.'

'Tell me another,' he laughed. 'I'll teach you some new tricks of diplomacy!'

I protested, but he refused to believe, and took me to a police station not far away. I demanded to see his superior, but he pulled me hard by the hand. He

would not even let me use the telephone, and pushed me inside a lock-up and turned a deaf ear to my shouts.

'Now don't disturb me in my sleep, you thief,' he said and, lying down on a bench, soon began to snore. There was no way to reach the President or send a telegram to Bachusan. In anger and shame I could heat his guttural snores till the disturbed dreary day dawned.

Seeing a Sergeant pass by the barred door of the cell, I called to him. Hearing a foreign accent he stopped and came to me. I told him who I was. He woke up the constable to enquire, but he only laughed at my account and asked for my carte d'identite which, naturally, I did not carry on my person. I insisted that they telephone the Embassy. The sergeant, however, got in touch with the Foreign Office, and a junior protocol man appeared after a long time. He was horified to see that it was me, and the state I was in. The police officer began to apologise. It was a genuine mistake, he said. My captor was utterly abject and did not know where to hide. Whereas I was vindicated, the great harm had been done. It was already past seven-thirty. The Attorney General had arrived....

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I did not make a protest. What explanation could I give for having stayed in some other ambassador's garden and sneak out like a thief? I hoped the story would not leak out. I was terribly shaken and remained confined to bed. It transpired there was a bloody coup d'etat in Zorastria. The old regime had toppled, the royal monarch murdered, his corpse being dragged in the streets. They said the Army was in control and Martial Law proclaimed. All old hands were dismissed including the Ambassador who was ordered confined to the Embassy, and a junior Second Secretary declared temporary Head of Mission. His wife, my dream love of a short-lived evening, must have tried to get in touch with me but, I suppose, had no means to do so. I was glad. I had no wish to associate with a discarded fogey even though his paramour were a toothsome beauty.

My absence at the airport on the arrival of the Attorney General was ascribed to sudden illness. I did not stir out for a week, missing all receptions and social activity. When I did get up my house was ready, and I occupied myself with furnishings and went all over Micea, down narrow, stone flagged alleys with open surface drains striking of offal and refuse. From still narrow bylanes rushed

children in dirty rags or with their private parts showing. Men passed languidly by. Women stopped other women in passing, like ants going in opposite directions, exchanged a few words and moved on.

The carpet shops stank of mildew, damp, wool and hides, as they sold bolsters, beads, woollen curtains and a hundred varied things. I must say though dirty, they were well stocked with real Bukharas and even carpets from Balkh and Shiraz. As the sun never penetrated their quarter, tallow candles and dim bulbs lighted up the dark interiors insufficiently, and they had to unroll their stuff in open doors or the street which attracted a curious crowd of boys and idle men who rubbed their nails along the sides of my car, or drummed their fingers on its bonnet and the boot, fingering the flag and smudging it with dirt and grease.

Furniture and linen I bought from foreign firms, and in the junk market found even antique, both Queen Anne and Ming, which some connoisseur's illegitimate heirs had sold as out-of-date and refuse. I also acquired some poison plates and Chinese vases which, CDA however said, were imitations and not genuine. They pleased my heart in my case.

One day as the dirt and rubble were being cleared from the house in the final cleaning operations, some women of -the workers' gang, oblivious of my presence, sang in a chorus a lilting tune which caught my fancy, being gay. The Chancellor happened to be there, and I asked him what the words meant. He listened intently and hesitated. When I prodded him he said:

'They are singing—I translate as best—I can:

The Ambassador lost his honour,
He lost his honour and was beaten
By a common constable
At five o'clock in the morning.
Oh, he's a thief and sissy,
He has lost his honour and name,
For Oh, he's only a sissy...'

The story was out, and even on the lips of vulgar people! How did it get round? I fumed. Protocol had promised that no news will ever be published. It was not published, but it had spread by word of mouth. Should I not protest? But then, it could be any ambassador. Why should it be me? The Corps Diplomatique could never know. Let sleeping dogs lie.

The news about my house had, however, come to be known, for the Burmese Ambassador mentioned it to me. He also said in a tete-a-tete:

'Strange things are said to be happening at the Kharosan Embassy.'

'What?' I asked with curiosity.

I've heard that the Kharosan Ambassador has been ex-perimenting with some kind of secret device, and extraordinary sights have been witnessed of rats going in as rats and coming out as men.'

It was a long time since I had heard about the rats; and I knew about the Kharosan Ambassador's experiment with budgerigars and radio-active waves. But this was so fantastic that I burst out laughing.

'Now, now, Excellency, you must be a simpleton,' I said, 'to believe in such a ratty story.'

'I don't know, Excellency, but my Third Secretary himself saw a rat cross the boundary of the Kharosan Embassy and turn into a man. The poor chap was so frightened he ran for his life.'

'That was only hallucination.'

Maybe. But Col Bullshot has been seen loitering around the Kharosan compound in the dark, looking at everything surreptitiously. The Serpentinian Ambassador was telling me; and he is a great friend of his, you know. He came upon the Colonel the other night and saw him quickly hide behind a tree

All that sounded so nonsensical. Nevertheless, I decided to check up with Sir Broadguage. He said with a twinkle in his eye and merriment on his face;

'The problem could be solved by turning rats into men. But imagine a situation in which the opposite came to happen. You remember what Nietzche said? 'Beware when you fight a monster that you do not become a monster yourself.' That was too ghastly to be true!

At buffets and receptions the usual life went on unconcerned. The Diplomatic Corps was incorrigible.

'How nasty for this poor dear,' I overheard.

'Today a prisoner, yesterday a king.'

And I heard poetry recited: 'Sceptre and crown must tumble down'; but I was

through with philosophy.

'What will happen to her jewellery?'

'I had always admired her jade bracelet.'

'The one like a cobra in a coil?'

'I would have called my Charmian and put an end to suspense.'

'Too terrible, my dear. I would never do such a thing. Life is too precious to end in such a way ...'

'And do you know, there was a thief.'

'Really, Anne darling?'

'Ask Lady Bird. Their Attache said he was caught at five o'clock in the morning.'

'How lucky for them, after all that political topsy-turvy- dom. Her jewels could keep her going.'

'It was no common thief, I heard.'

'What did they do to him?...'

It was becoming hot. My ears began to tingle; and with tingling ears I read the deciphered telegram on my table.

'The President has learnt with great displeasure,' it said, 'of your escapade and wild antics in the capital of Ratisan. By your infamous behaviour and absenting yourself from functions connected with such an important personage as the Attorney General of Samia, you have put your career in jeopardy, apart from blackening the good name of Bachusan. You are accordingly ordered to report to Head-quarters in the shortest time necessary for winding up your personal affairs, for disposal. Hand over charge to the First Secretary, repeat First Secretary, who is appointed Counsellor and Charge d'Affaires *a pied* from the day you hand over charge to him. Necessary papers in that connection are being sent by diplomatic bag.

'To save the Government further embarrassment, you are to tell the Ratisanian authorities that you have been called back for re-assignment. In any case, if you can explain your conduct satisfactorily to the President you may be sent back to the Army, or employed elsewhere, although the Government can give no

undertaking. Signed: Foreign Secretary.'

The last sentence took away the sting from the stricture. I was much too important to be dispensable. Not for nothing had I won the Order of Knight Errant! And I wrote appropriately to the Chef du Cabinet. The CDA's promotion bothered me. I did not know what *a pied* meant and asked Toon-toon. He said it was an appointment in Foreign Service below the rank of Minister, but implied the officer would remain permanent Head of Mission—on his own feet, he explained. The fools had never read my report, it seemed, nor promoted personnel on merit. Just like all Foreign Offices. No wonder they called theirs Walk-O-Fool in China, I was told.

Walk or lie down, it was same to me. I was running. The I Government of Ratisan informed me that they would like to honour me with the highest order of the land in recognition of my services to Ratisan and my own country. I felt flushed and exultant. Let CDA walk on his own legs. I was flying on the carpet to diplomacy and my past exploits in the Army!...

And there were cocktails and farewell parties which were cut short by the Foreign Office, which reminded me I was to hand over in a week and return. When I came to think of it, Col Bullshot was the secret informer and at the back of all the intrigue. I recalled his expression after the remark I had made to him, and his sharp eyes following my movements at receptions, and then his total indifference, once the mischief had been done.

Yet I was going back, and honourably, as it should have been. The Burmese Ambassador insisted on feting me the night before the Ratisanian honour was to be conferred. He had proved to be a truer friend than Toon-toon on whom I had banked for past associations. Life had strange surprises in store for man which changed one's outlook and led wise men and fools to dusty death in happiness and ignominy....

The dinner and dance at the Rodent Roundelay was a select and intimate gathering. The Burmese Ambassador had invited some junior officers with pretty wives. Toon-toon and my Scandalasian love were present, and whiskey and wine flowed freely to add to the zest and hilarity of the occasion. Dim lights and syncopated music, and the dance floor behind a trellissed wall of Passion Flower created an illusion of the Garden of Eden. The Charge d'Affaires of Greece had brought the ravishing Ratisanian belle I had met at the Minister's banquet then lost track of except in' memory. We toasted one another and drank to each

other's health. Toon-toon and I were out of the trenches and celebrating the end of the War. We, nonetheless, missed the memorable austerity which had thrown us on our resources, and the joys of juicy wine surreptitiously drunk from the bottle. For once inhibitions of rank and style had vanished, and the gates of the Academy opened wide as I led my Scandalasian love for a dance.

With so much wine consumed, all reservations of formality and social fear disappeared. Then after the first dance, I led the much desired Ratisanian to the floor. The mystery of the flaps had left a rankling impression and cried within me for a probe. I pressed her to my chest and moved my arm at free will up and down. Then dance after dance I kept her as my partner, and giddy laughter filled the hall. Toon-toon dragged the youngest, the Burmese Ambassador, those most ripe in a heavy, bear-like dance, his body shaking with the movements from head to^toe, and often out of time. My Scandalasian love was, for a change, forgotten, and sulked or danced with her paramour.

Then after the hour of midnight the moon swept over the glass dome of the Hall m all her soft effulgence and soul enlivening glory. My movements became gentle as heart on heart the belle and I sank deep into the waltz, while someone, for effect or mischief, switched off the lights.

When the lights went up again I was still exploring the mystery of Eve before the fall. A noise of hilarity whirled past as the music changed its tempo, and the Burmese Ambassador, ambling and swaying, now running or jerking, clasping my Scandalasian beauty tight, wearing his national costume, went into a whirl and reeled. A sudden noise of revealing laughter drew attention to a merry sight. The Ambassador's lower garment had come undone unnoticed and slipped to the ground. The uproarious laughter and catcalls echoed down the hall, for Adam stared at his progeny in the dress of his earthly exile. To save him embarrassment, the Management switched off the lights. The comedy had come to a melodramatic close; the joys of godliness were at end. I drove back in my Cadillac in a never-ending trance....

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When I woke up in the morning I had a peculiar sensation of something moving at the end of my spine, something stiff and long, yet elastic like a cord, though part of my anatomy. A strange fear came over me. It ran through each nerve and artery, and tingled through my being. It was a feeling of something horrible I had

seen but could never imagine in my wildest dreams would happen to me, which had transferred itself to my person. I lay still in bed, afraid of moving lest the impossible proved to be real, holding my breath, unable to shut or open my eyes. Something whispered in my ears it was a nightmare, and God Almighty had come and was saying: 'This in truth is your semblance, and verily of all men. How long can you escape your destiny?' I lifted my hand to wipe the sweat from my brow. Auto-matically, as through by reflex action, my other hand went up too, and I started cleansing my mouth with deft movements.

Then suddenly I cast fear out of mind and, pushing the blankets aside, jumped out of bed. There indeed was a tail dragging behind me. I looked into the mirror and was horrified. It was not Sourirada Soutanna, that is me, Minister Plenipotentiary and Ambassador Extraordinary of the People's Presidency of Bachusan, but a rat that was gazing from the gilt-edged frame. I rang the bell, and pressed it hard, wishing for reassurance that what I saw was only a dream.

The bearer walked in balancing a tea tray on one hand, my newly pressed diplomatic uniform on a hanger in the other. I wished to get back under the blankets to escape being recognised or seen in my new identity. But he did not even notice the change. He behaved as though nothing had happened, that my outward form was original, my semblance un- semblable, even as at birth. The inner reality was mine and mine alone, the fear consummated in the verity of life. Yet I was amazed to find that the man who had come in was also like me, image of my image, form of my own form, unmistakably semblable. I was beside myself with the odium of infamy, and ordered the Boy out. He was taken aback by this unexpected command, and in surprise moved his round black eyes and whiskers, unable to decide whether I was like him a quadruped or a man. I was so outraged by this mimicry that I stamped my foot. He jumped from the table and ran. Everything whirled in my brain. The image in the mirror multiplied and was hurled back in a cascade of shadows and light. Was I indeed a rodent or a man? Then as suddenly a wave of resignation engulfed me, and I quickly accepted my fate, as though nothing untoward had ever happened, that I was always thus and had been.

I did not have to go to the office, and no one need discover the change. They were all rats, anyway, descended from rats. As the investiture ceremony was to take place at ten, I dressed leisurely, arranging the medals and ribbons of Knight Errant in front of the mirror, pushing the dragging tail in one leg of the trousers. Then I ordered my Cadillac and drove to the Palace, alone.

The roads were unusually deserted and quiet. There was no sign of men lounging on the sidewalks or women fluttering their flaps. Empty cans with hands clasped across gold laces and bulldog boots lay scattered, and ice-cream banners waved in the air contaminated with hate. The Samians had been experimenting with a new device for the destruction of rats under the new slogan of Atoms for Peace, emphasised at the Conference of non-Nuclear States at Geneva. Its effectiveness on rodents was not known; but it had succeeded admirably with men. A few mice and children of the minority community frolicked as though monarchs of the scene. I supposed the populace had gone to the Palace to witness the conferment of the highest order of the land on the envoy of a brotherly country, that was me.

My heart went out to the rats. Already at the Rodent Roundelay the previous night I had noticed the dancers were not men, but rodents going in two by two, white and black and brown, heeling and heaving on their hind legs, the forearms holding hands or wrapped round their partners, the tails beating time. Then circles had formed and looped and swung and split up into human forms and dissolved into rodents, whirling and swirling as in a kaleidoscope, the patterns forming and unforming, up and down and sideways, going round and round. I too was dancing with the Ratisanian belle, and my Scandalasian partner was following my movements with accusing eyes. Then the lights had gone off. The couples had stood rooted to the ground.

I had thought then it was my fancy or workings of the over-wrought brain. Now I knew that it was real. I could not recognise the President nor the Ministers and officials, nor diplomats including the Ambassador of Kharosa, Buddy Bagatale and Broadguage Bloomingfield. CDA had disappeared behind his new coat, as had Toon-toon and the others. I missed my Scandalasian love whose husband, being still unrecognised, was not invited to the investiture. I remembered the promise I had made to speak about him to the Chef du Cabinet. To my great astonishment and joy, however, in the Vice Foreign Minister's place sat the missed lady of old, wrinkled and thin, mere skin and bones, looking with tired yet still sharp, smoke-coloured eyes. I was overwhelmed with the unfulfilled desire of walking over and shaking her by the hand. But already the voice of the Chief of Protocol was calling the audience to order. The citation was going to be read. Then a voice, rather squeaking and squeamish, came into my ears:

'I, Politicus Nihilibum Inhumanitare, President of the Republic of Ratisan, in the name of the people and on behalf of the Government, by virtue of authority

invested in me, and in recognition of the meritorious services rendered to the cause of international peace and fraternal ties between our two Presidencies, do hereby confer on His Excellency General Sourirada Soutanna, Minor Domo, Knight Errant Third Class, and Minister Plenipotentiary and Ambassador Extraordinary of the People's Presidency of Bachusan, the glorious Order of the Golden Rat.... '

The rest of the words were drowned in loud applause. I was so engrossed in the thought of the Vice Foreign Minister, lost and found at last, and in the pride of the occasion, and so overwhelmed by sentiment, that I had become oblivious of my surroundings. With the sharp noise of clapping I came to and looked up without fear for the first time. On the dias stood an embellished rodent; and I noticed with relief that the others who filled the Investiture Hall were also rats sitting primly in their seats.

As the President put the ribbon of the Glorious Order round my neck from which hung a gold medallion with the engraved figure of a chubby rat sitting on its haunches, the spectators stared wonder-eyed, and burst into loud applause again and stood up in their seats clapping persistently. In the excitement of the moment my tail wriggled out. Not finding any place to hide it, I put it between my teeth and bowed....

All that I remember after that is asking the Minister of Trade and Commerce at the banquet that followed, recalling the other banquet at his house: 'The quails you had served us, Mr Minister, were delicious. I hope the cats have done a good job of the rats.'

His round little eyes brimmed over with retrospective gloom. 'Alas, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, the rats have increased as you can see,' and he waved his forearm so as to include the rest of the gathered company, 'but the quails have vanished, devoured by the cats before they escaped into Sacerdotia in search of food. We had to sign a deal with Serpentinia for deadly snakes.... '

I beat a tattoo with my teeth. I had come to Ratisan a General, but was going back a rat with a tail, or tale if you like. Yet as awareness of the situation awakened slowly within me, I reflected through the haze of events and the metamorphosis, whoever was responsible for my condition, Samia or Kharosa, Communist or Democrat, they we're just men, and it has been going on for thousands of years. Mankind has been caught in it as completely as the rats, covered with dirt. Whether renewal or decay, the wheel of law will not cease so

long as the earth survives and the skies endure....